

THE RAT PATROL

The Iron Monster Raid

AUTHORIZED EDITION







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WHITMAN PUBLISHING DIVISION

Western Publishing Company, Inc.

Racine, Wisconsin

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Television Productions

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Produced in the U.S.A. by
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1 | *The Monster in the Rain*

THE RAIN STARTED again. The four men in the U.S. Army jeep bumping along the desert road in North Africa hunched their shoulders against the chill December drizzle.

The driver, Pvt. Tully Pettigrew, swerved to avoid hitting a bomb crater. The jeep's wheels slipped and churned in the soft mud, but Tully expertly pulled them back into the deep ruts.

He shot a quick glance at the grim-faced American sergeant in the front seat beside him.

"The bridge is out over that deep wadi, Sarge," he said. "These desert creek beds fill up fast in rainy weather. Think I should cut south where we'll have a better ford?"

Sgt. Sam Troy, leader of the four-man commando group known as the "Rat Patrol," shook his head. Water dripped from the brim of his Australian bush hat—a souvenir of his service with the Aussies.

"Keep going, Tully," he said bleakly. "If we turn south, we'll hit those German panzer columns again."

"That's right," Sgt. Jack Moffitt said from the rear of the jeep, where he and Pvt. Mark Hitchcock rode with a .50-caliber machine gun on a swivel mount. "We have only about fifty rounds of ammunition left. I'd hate to meet up with Capt. Hans Dietrich again with no more firepower than that."

"That's right," Sam Troy agreed. "That guy is the wiliest tank company commander Rommel ever trained. He's given us more personal trouble than the rest of the Wehrmacht combined."

"Is this *really* a desert?" Hitchcock broke in

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plaintively. "Do you think Tully took a wrong turn and has run us up to Alaska?"

"Oh, it is jolly well the desert," Jack Moffitt replied. His clipped English accent contrasted with Hitchcock's flat New England tones. "This is just a liquid sandstorm!"

"I expected North Africa to be sun and camels and a genuine Beau Geste behind every sand dune," Hitchcock mumbled through the spray of water the jeep threw in his face as Tully hit a chuckhole in the road. "What do I get? Mud and rain! This war is sure one mixed up—"

"Hold it, Tully!" Sam Troy's voice cut in sharply.

Pettigrew jammed down hard on the brakes. The wheels dug into the mud. Troy was thrown forward against the dashboard. The two men in the back bumped hard against their machine-gun mount.

"Sorry, Troy," Tully began, turning to their leader.

He spoke to an empty seat. The sergeant was already out of the jeep. They saw him running, tommy gun in hand, toward a knoll that rose

near the banks of a deep wadi—a normally dry creek bed that had been cut across the Tunisian desert by torrents from the seasonal rains.

Silently and without orders, but with the practiced movement of men who have worked long together, the other three soldiers took defensive positions.

Tully Pettigrew snatched his rifle from the boot on the driver's side of the jeep. Mark Hitchcock grabbed a tommy gun. Sgt. Jack Moffitt pulled the charging handle on the machine gun mounted in the back.

Tully covered Troy while the English sergeant and the other American watched the approaches to guard against any surprises.

"What do you think he saw?" Hitchcock asked in a low voice.

"Hard to tell." The Englishman's voice was only barely audible above the hammer of the increasing rain on the metal hood of the jeep. "We should be out of Jerry's territory now and safely inside the Allied sector. But one can never tell."

Hitchcock nodded. He knew from the grim experience of fighting Rommel's Afrika Korps in

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Libya how swiftly battle lines could change in the fluid fighting between Allied armor and the hard-hitting tanks of the German Army.

It was the first week of December, 1942—almost a month since the Allied invasion force had landed at Casablanca to start an attack on German-held North Africa.

For three weeks the British and American tank units had charged across Algeria and into Tunisia before massed German tanks and infantry had stopped their advance about thirty miles from Tunis.

It was more than a normal setback for the combined British-American forces. The rainy season was beginning. If the invasion force were stalled much longer, the rain and mud would force a three-month stalemate. That would give the Germans sufficient time to rush in supplies and reinforcements. It could mean life or death for thousands of Allied soldiers—or even loss of the war.

Hitchcock shook off his gloomy thoughts. He glanced back to try and spot their leader. He glimpsed Sam Troy scaling the high ground. Troy

raised a pair of binoculars to his eyes with his left hand.

It was getting dark fast. Tully Pettigrew shook his head. "I don't see how Troy can see anything in this muck."

Mark Hitchcock said, "Troy doesn't have to see. He's become so much of a desert rat that he can *feel* what's wrong."

"I know what you mean," Tully said.

Sam Troy was the most experienced desert fighter among them and possibly in the entire United States Army. He had fought with the Australians for two years before transferring back with American forces. He still wore an Australian bush hat with one brim cocked up as a memento of those days. Back with the Americans, his experience, daring, and coolness under fire got him tagged for the most dangerous job in North Africa: leading a behind-the-lines demolition squad. The team had to go deep into German-held territory, strike hard, and get out fast.

Suddenly they saw Troy duck behind a cluster of boulders on the knoll. Shortly thereafter he raised up and waved his hand in the circular mo-

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tion that in infantry language means "Assemble here."

Pettigrew ran toward him in a protective crouch, holding his rifle tightly, ready to fire.

"See something, Sarge?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes . . . a tank," Troy said. His thin, brown face was grim. "The weather is so bad I can't tell if it is one of ours or Jerry's. Take a look."

He passed the glasses to Pettigrew. Keeping in a low crouch, Tully worked his way up through the rocks where he could cautiously raise himself up without being seen. The rain was now a light downpour, and the daylight was fading fast. Within another fifteen minutes it would be totally dark.

Tully put the binoculars to his eyes after first pushing back the rim of his helmet with his rifle barrel. He saw the blurred silhouette of a tank and what seemed to be two others coming along behind it. They were moving slowly on the opposite side of the wadi.

"Visibility is just too bad," he said, dropping back down beside his chief. "I think they are ours, but I wouldn't bet on it."

"No," Troy replied. "It sure doesn't pay to bet when you're betting your life. We're in a tough spot whether they are ours or Jerry's. Three massed tanks means the battle line has shifted over this way."

"And we're right in the middle of it!" Tully said.

"And with the light as poor as it is, neither side will be able to identify us as friend or foe. If they're smart, they'll blow us off the map and ask who we are later."

He led the way back down to the jeep.

"Trouble, Troy?" Moffitt asked as they came up.

"Three tanks. Maybe ours. Maybe Jerry's."

The Englishman grimaced. "We are getting low on petrol," he said. "We lost our two spare cans when Captain Dietrich cornered us back there at Sidi-bou-Ibn."

"And we're down to fifty rounds of ammunition for the machine gun," Hitchcock put in.

"Grenades?" Troy snapped.

"One left," Moffitt replied.

Troy frowned. They had just come from a

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desperate attack on a German Luftwaffe fuel dump. In the fight they lost one of their two jeeps, but he had not known their munitions and gas were so low.

"Fifty rounds and one grenade," Tully Pettigrew drawled. "That's fifty-one Jerries if we shoot straight enough. And I still have my bowie knife if we run into fifty-two!"

Sam Troy gave the young private a sidelong glance. Although they had been together on at least fifty raids, he could never tell for sure when Tully was joking. He knew Pettigrew came from the Kentucky hills, where he grew up with a rifle in his hands. He wasn't sure but what Tully seriously believed he could account for fifty-one of the enemy with fifty rounds of ammunition and one hand grenade.

"I hope you can do it," Troy said. "But if you don't mind, the rest of us less crack shots will just do a little running."

He turned to Jack Moffitt. "We'll head for the wadi, Jack," he said. "If the water is still low enough, we'll drive right up the stream. The banks will protect us from sight of the tanks.

Then when we get a clear route, we'll head across the desert for home. Have we enough gas?"

"Probably not," the Englishman replied. "It will take more petrol if we have to use the four-wheel drive."

"Well, Napoleon's men marched. George Washington's hoofed it, too. So I guess Eisenhower's troops can do the same thing if they try," Troy said.

They climbed back in the jeep, with Moffitt at the wheel now. He drove slower than the break-neck speed the Rat Patrol usually traveled. The lesser speed would conserve more of their precious gasoline.

The jeep skirted the knoll to keep as much high ground as possible between the Rat Patrol and the unknown tanks. Tully manned the .50-caliber machine gun in the rear. Mark Hitchcock crouched beside him with a tommy gun cocked and ready to fire. They kept careful watch in the direction of the tanks, but Troy ignored them. He stood up, balancing himself as best he could while their vehicle bounced over the uneven ground. He was watching in the opposite direc-

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tion. He hoped to catch some sign of the danger that caused the three tanks to mass together for protection.

Moffitt headed directly for the wadi. The gloom was thickening fast. The combination of rain and increasing darkness was cutting visibility so badly that he had to slow down more. The desert hardpan was spotted with rocks that could easily wreck the jeep.

He pulled up a few feet from the lip of the stream bed. It was fully two hundred feet across from bank to bank. Though the bed was normally dry, they could hear the rush of water in the darkness below. The hard-packed desert causes rapid runoff of water in a rain. This causes the dried bed to fill quickly during flash floods.

Troy and Tully leaped out. They hurried along the bank until they found a place where the high bank had collapsed. They went down it to the water level.

"It's rising fast, but we can make it," Troy said. "Go tell Jack to come on."

Tully ran back up the slope to the jeep. "There's a cave-in about twenty feet to the left, Sarge," he

said. "You should be able to get down it in four-wheel drive."

"How deep is the water?" the Englishman asked. "If we drown out the engine—"

"It's only about a foot deep now, but it's rising fast," the Kentuckian said. "Troy and I will go ahead to sound the depth."

He started back. The jeep, with only its black-out lights showing, followed slowly behind him. The crumbled bank sloped down at a steep angle. Tully looked back. It was almost totally dark. The jeep made a faint shadow against the sodden sky. Below, it was inky black.

Moffitt put the little vehicle in low and started inching down. The broken ground was rock and sand, and they did not slip. He reached the bottom of the wadi and stopped with his front wheels just in the rushing water.

Then, with Tully and Troy walking ahead, Moffitt drove the jeep into the stream.

Suddenly the drumming patter of rain was drowned by the scream of a high-velocity shell. It ripped the night air above them and smashed into the bank.

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"Get under—fast!" Troy yelled.

The jeep was half in and half out of the water. Troy hit the wet sand and rolled under the back. Tully was right behind him. Moffitt and Hitchcock splashed in the water, trying to get under the front end. The New Englander hit his head on the bumper. He slumped, momentarily dazed. Moffitt caught him by the hair and pulled Hitchcock's head out of the water before he drowned.

Rocks and dirt beat down on top of the jeep. The four men pulled together in a tight knot as the little vehicle shook under the pounding of falling debris. Water, dirt, and rock cascaded under the jeep onto the crouching men.

When the fallout ceased, the four men gingerly crawled from under the jeep.

"Okay, Hitchcock?" Troy asked.

Mark nodded his aching head. "Sure," he said quickly, stifling a groan.

"That had to be an artillery shell," Moffitt said.

"They couldn't have brought up big guns this soon," Troy objected, favoring a badly bruised leg.

"A bomb?" Tully suggested.

"No, it was a shell," Troy replied. "We'll have to find out what later. Right now the important thing is, do we still have a jeep?"

They found the vehicle filled with dirt and rock. The .50-caliber machine-gun barrel was bent and useless. Worst of all, a rock as large as a man's head had smashed the instrument panel.

Hitchcock clawed enough rock from the front to get in. He tried the motor. There was no reaction.

"Check under the hood," Troy suggested. "If the trouble is just the ignition wiring, we can put a bypass jumper wire from the battery to the coil. We got to get out of here fast!"

While Hitch and Tully raised the jeep's hood and fumbled in the dark, Moffitt walked stiffly around the stalled vehicle to talk to Troy.

"I think those massed tanks were our own M-3's," he said to their leader. "They massed to get concentrated firepower at whatever threw that shell."

Troy nodded. "I think so, too," he said. "My guess from the sound of the explosion is that the shell was an eighty-eight-millimeter at least."

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"My guess, too, Troy," the Englishman replied. "The thirty-seven-millimeter guns on our tanks haven't a chance against something that powerful. How did Jerry get that kind of gun up here without our Intelligence knowing it?"

"I think we're in for serious trouble," Troy said. "We could lose the war right here in Tunisia. Come on, let's get up on the bank and see if we can tell what's going on."

Then to the two men working in the dark to get the jeep started, he added, "If you do any good, pull the jeep across the wadi before the water gets too deep to ford. Jack and I will be right back."

The rain was coming down harder now. It was so black that Moffitt grabbed Troy's pistol belt to keep from getting separated.

Then another of the high-velocity shells screamed out of the darkness. Both men hit the ground hard. There was no cover. They flattened out, pressing into the earth to avoid the flying shrapnel.

The shell hit across the wadi, farther down than the first. It exploded with a flash of fire that

ripped through the darkness. The ground shook.

Troy jumped up. In the momentary flash of light he caught a glimpse of the ungainly outline of an American M-3 tank. The turret, perched on the forward edge of the flat top deck, had been knocked off by the explosion. Flames shot up from inside. In the flaming light, Troy saw two other M-3's wheel about. They were throwing all the power of their 250-horsepower engines into a break to get away.

There was another belch of flame. It was directly in front of one of the fleeing tanks. The concussion ripped off the left track, spinning the helpless vehicle about.

"What's doing it?" Moffitt cried. "I can't see a thing in this rain!"

"Wait!" Troy gasped. "I think I see it!"

"I see it, too, Troy. It's a tank, but what a monster!"

Sam Troy stared, speechless, at the steel juggernaut. He could see it dimly through the rain by the flaming light from the burning American tanks.

The monster tank was visible only for a couple

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of seconds. Then it plunged out of sight as it descended the bank of the wadi.

"Troy," Jack Moffitt said, his voice trembling slightly. "If that thing turns our way instead of crossing the wadi, it will run straight over our jeep. Hitch and Tully won't have a chance!"

2 | *The Secret Weapon*

THE TWO MEN started to run back to the jeep. They slipped and slid down the bank. The monster tank's engines roared as the driver throttled more power to splash through the rising water.

Troy scrambled up out of the mud and helped Moffitt to his feet. Then they hurried on to the stalled jeep.

"We've got the ignition spliced, Sarge," Tully said as they ran up.

"Did you see that monster?" Hitchcock put in

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quickly before Troy could reply.

"I saw it!" Troy snapped. "And we have to get out of here before it sees us. We're in real trouble."

"Get in the jeep, Sarge!" Tully said quickly. "We'll make a break for it!"

"We haven't a chance," the Rat Patrol leader replied. "We'd have to cut right in front of the tank. He couldn't miss seeing us. The light from that burning tank is too bright."

"But—" Tully began.

"Not a chance!" Troy snapped. "Dig in! We stay right here. There's a chance the tank commander will be so busy looking for those M-3's that he'll overlook us."

"Hardly," Moffitt remarked.

"I don't think so," Troy said, his lean face twisting into a thin grin. "He might just be so busy he won't have a chance to look around."

"What have you in mind?" Moffitt asked suspiciously. "Remember, we're just about out of ammunition, and forty-five-caliber slugs bounce off that kind of armor."

"Get across the wadi before Jerry rounds the

bend, Jack," Troy said hastily. "Get behind anything that will shield you. Fire right straight at that thing. Make sure he sees your muzzle blast."

"I get it," Moffitt replied crisply. "Draw his attention from the jeep."

"You get it right," Troy replied. "But be sure you don't get it right in the neck, too. Keep down. Just draw his attention."

"Don't worry about my neck," Moffitt retorted. "I'll do enough worrying about it for both of us. What crazy thing are you intending to do yourself? That worries me more."

In answer, Sam Troy turned to Private Hitchcock. He said to the New Englander, "Hitch, where's that last grenade? I want it."

"Wait a minute, Sam!" Moffitt protested. "You can't fight that land battleship with a hand grenade. It's suicide!"

"This tank is obviously that secret weapon of Hitler's we've heard rumors about," Troy said soberly. "It looks like a good one. If it passes its combat tests and goes into production, it could easily tip the war Jerry's way."

"Knocking out one tank won't stop Hitler from

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building more," Moffitt pointed out.

"No," Sam Troy replied. "But the Germans won't be able to pull the wreckage away. Our Intelligence can get a look at it and find out its weak points so we can fight back."

"It's coming, Sarge!" Hitchcock said.

"Hitch, you and Tully get a camouflage net over the jeep. It's rolled in the tarp. Jack, let's go!"

Troy spoke to the rain, for Jack Moffitt was already running to his post across the deepening stream of rushing water. Sam took the grenade Hitchcock handed him and started to run forward himself.

The darkness was cut by light from the burning tank. The American M-3 was "brewing," as the Desert Rats called it. Flames shot from every hatch. The iron shell of the tank lurched as ammunition exploded inside the tank. Tracer bullets streaked their red fire through cracks in the sides. The rubber tread on the left track was also flaming furiously.

Troy looked back. He caught a glimpse of Jack Moffitt on the other side of the stream. Then

he lost sight of the Englishman.

The German secret tank lumbered into view again. It was rolling down the center of the wadi, splashing water as it came. The runoff now was nearly knee-deep and still rising. Troy knew that within a very few minutes it would become a raging torrent—too swift and deep for any man to ford.

"If we don't get out of here within the next five minutes," he told himself, "this place will be our deathtrap!"

Across the stream, Jack Moffitt opened up with his burst of diversionary gunfire. As if his bullets were signals, the sodden night sky split open. What seemed like a midnight sun blazed down upon them.

Troy shot a startled look at the sky. Three parachute flares dangled in the rain, high over the battlefield. The noise of the giant tank's engine had drowned the roar of the plane that dropped them.

The flare was a battle signal. Far to the right, the muzzle blasts from big guns streaked across the sky. The scream and boom of exploding shells



were deafening. The ground shook under the battle fury.

"We must be in the dead center of the battlefield," Troy thought.

There was no time to worry about the rest of the war. Troy's personal part in it was upon him. The secret German tank loomed up. It was huge, but squat. The front sloped back in thick armor plates. The slender spar of an 88-millimeter barrel protruded wickedly from the top.

The tank moved swiftly on extra-wide tracks, and, to Troy's experienced eyes, the Jerry land monster would be able to cross softer ground—for all its greater weight—than American tanks.

As it bore down upon him Troy hunched down to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. He tightly gripped the grenade.

From the other side Jack Moffitt fired a burst from his submachine gun. Troy could see the tracers flaring through the rain. Answering shots belched from a gun port under the cannon barrel as a German gunner inside pressed the triggers of his own twin machine guns.

The deadly spray ripped the wadi wall. It tore

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into the protecting bulge behind which Jack Moffitt crouched.

Troy waited in suspense for the huge tank to rumble past him. The top hatch was open. He could see the form of the tank commander looking out.

Across the wadi, Jack Moffitt fired again. At that moment, when the German's eyes were on the Englishman's position, Sam Troy leaped forward. He hoped to shove the grenade between the track and its rollers. If the explosion could knock off the track, it would cripple the big monster so badly it would be unable to move.

He was so intent upon his target that he did not see the American M-3 loom up on the wadi bank behind him. The wary German tank commander was more watchful.

He shouted a command down to the driver. The right track locked. The left track, still moving, caused the big tank to lurch toward the right just as Sergeant Troy tried to ram the grenade in between the tread and the rollers.

Sam missed his target. The grenade bounced off the edge of the armor plate.

The grenade exploded just as the American M-3 tank on the wadi bank fired a 37-millimeter shell at the German giant.

The two explosions blended into one tremendous roar. Troy threw himself flat. Water, rock, mud, and sand spewed up in a murderous geyser.

The shock and the heavy weight of the American tank cracked the water-softened bank. It started to slide. Troy leaped back as the tank came plunging down toward him. He darted around in back of the German tank, splashing through the rising water.

The Jerry tank commander bawled an order. The iron monster spun around. The back armored fender caught Troy a glancing blow on the hip. He was knocked back. He tried to get up, but dirt from the collapsing bank poured over his legs.

Troy was right on the edge of the water. He tried to jerk free, but the heavy weight of the dirt held him fast. He began to claw at the imprisoning dirt, struggling frantically to free himself before the rising water drowned him.

The American tank hit the stream with a crash

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that shook the ground. It rolled over on its turret. Its tread kept rolling like an upended turtle kicking its feet in the air.

Troy saw the German tank turn and rumble up the opposite bank. At the top it paused. The tank commander rose cautiously out of the hatch again to get an unrestricted view of the battlefield. Light from the still-burning first tank illuminated him clearly.

"Dietrich!" Troy gasped. "Captain Dietrich! I should have known they would have him testing the new tank!"

In the tank German Capt. Hans Dietrich, a brilliant panzer commander who had tangled with the Rat Patrol many times before, shouted, "Fire!"

The giant tank's turret revolved swiftly. The cannon barrel dropped. It looked to Troy more like an artillery piece than a tank. The steel hull jerked as the gun fired. The 88-millimeter shell slammed into the overturned American M-3. The tank split open and fire flamed from the break.

Troy clawed desperately at the dirt imprisoning his legs. He knew he had to get free at once. He

would be riddled by flying slugs as soon as the tank fire started exploding the ammunition.

He glanced anxiously at the burning tank. There was no sign of anyone trying to get out. "The crew must be dead," he thought.

Across the wadi, Jack Moffitt darted from his shelter. Fire was blazing furiously now in the tank near Troy.

"Sam!" he called anxiously.

"I'm pinned down, Jack!" the Rat Patrol leader yelled back.

"I'm coming!" the Englishman shouted.

"Don't do it, Jack!" Troy yelled back. "That tank will start brewing any minute. No use for both of us to get it!"

"I can make it," Moffitt replied.

"*Don't do it, Jack!*" Troy shouted. "You can't help me now and dead men don't win wars."

Moffitt hesitated. He knew Sam Troy was right. His job was not to throw himself away uselessly on an impossible situation. But he could not bring himself to abandon the man he had fought beside in half a hundred desert battles.

"What can I do?" he asked himself.

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As he hesitated the jeep suddenly loomed up out of the rain. It was running without lights but was plainly visible in the light of the blazing tank.

"We got the ignition wires patched," Hitchcock said hastily. "Where's Sergeant Troy?"

Moffitt swung into the back of the jeep. "Get moving!" he said quickly to Pettigrew, who was behind the wheel. "Sam's trapped. We must get him out."

"Where is he?" Pettigrew asked, shoving the jeep back in gear.

"On the other side of that burning tank. Step on it. The ammunition is going to start going off any minute."

Tully gunned the jeep's engine. The jeep splashed and bucked as it charged through the water, circling around the wrecked tank. The heat of the fire was scorching.

"There he is, Sarge!" Hitchcock cried. "He's buried under that landslide!"

As they headed toward the trapped man, ammunition started to explode in the tank. Two 37-millimeter shells ripped up through the shattered

side of the tank. Tracers started to streak in every direction.

"Too late!" Pettigrew cried. "We'll never make it now. Troy's a goner!"

"Not yet!" Moffitt cried. "Quickly! Get the jeep between Troy and the tank!"

It sounded like a suicide command, but Pettigrew did not question it. He spun the jeep's steering wheel. The little vehicle whipped around in response.

"Turn it over!" Moffitt shouted. "*Turn the jeep over!*"

Tully gave him a shocked look.

"Turn it over, I tell you!" Moffitt repeated. "Turn the jeep over or we're all dead men!"

Tully still didn't understand, but he knew that one man had to take command in a crisis. He jammed down hard on the accelerator and jerked the steering wheel. The jeep's front tires dug down into the dirt at the edge of the landslide. The three men jumped to the ground as the jeep turned over on its side.

Shells from the blazing tank whined through the rain about them. Ducking as low as possible,

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Moffitt and Tully were partially protected by the overturned jeep as they crawled to Troy's side. Flying slugs clanged against the underside of the little vehicle. One went over and cut the edge of Moffitt's beret. Another piece of steel clanged against Tully's steel helmet.

While the ammunition was armor-piercing and ordinarily would cut through a jeep's metal with ease, the situation was different now. The shells were not being fired from a gun so that all the explosive force was directed forward. As each shell burst in the flames, the casing shot backward, drastically reducing the forward thrust of the slug.

But although the force was lessened, there was still sufficient power to kill a man. The three men were in extreme danger as they frantically clawed at the dirt that imprisoned their leader.

While the exploding shells cracked and whined, the runoff from the heavy rain was rapidly raising the water in the rushing stream. It was hitting the corner of the burning tank, throwing up hissing steam.

While Hitchcock tore at the dirt with his hands,

Moffitt and Tully grabbed Troy under the arm-pits. They slowly pulled his legs free.

Then they quickly scrambled back against the barricading jeep until the brewing subsided inside the tank. Troy didn't thank the others for saving his life. There was no need. Saving each other's lives had become routine to all of them.

"Are you able to walk?" Moffitt asked Troy anxiously.

Troy extended his badly bruised legs. He got shakily to his feet. "I can make it," he said.

They walked around to assess the damage to the jeep. It was a mess. The oil pan was riddled. The gas tank was punctured and the transmission case cracked.

"It'll take a major shop overhaul to get it running again," Tully said.

"And we're twenty miles from camp and no wheels," Troy said sourly.

"Maybe we can trade that rakish Australian bush hat of yours to an Arab for a used camel," Moffitt suggested.

"If you were as smart as you try to be funny, you could figure a way to get us back," Troy said.

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"Sarge, that looked like Captain Dietrich sticking his head out of that tank," Hitchcock said.

"It was," Troy said grimly. "I got a good look at him. That thing could lose the war for us."

"Is it really that bad?" Tully Pettigrew inquired, worry lines deepening between his eyes.

"It is that bad," Troy said soberly. "We did all right from the time we landed in North Africa in November until the attack stalled outside Tunis. Now the Wehrmacht not only has us stopped, but has pushed us back to the Medjerda River. It appears that we've seen an Allied counterattack fail again."

"And with the rainy season on us, we are going to be stopped until spring," Moffitt added.

"That will give Hitler time to get more of these land battleships into combat if the tests on this one pan out," Troy said.

"What can we do about it?" Tully asked.

"We might knock out this monster before they can run enough combat tests to get all the bugs out," Troy said. "I'm volunteering you and you and you to go back and destroy it at the test site."

"You're wasting time trying to volunteer me,"

Pettigrew said with a grin. "I'm already volunteered."

"Then let's get moving," Troy said. "We've got to get back to headquarters and get two more jeeps."

"Lead the way," Jack Moffitt said.

3 | *The Rough Road Back*

THERE WAS nothing to do but walk. They started struggling through the mud. A half mile farther on they struck a gravel road that helped some, but it had been peppered with bombs to prevent supply trucks from using it.

The battle line was what generals call "fluid," but which the soldiers who have to fight in it call "one heck of a mixed-up mess." There was no order anywhere. Tanks, armored trucks, half-tracks, and infantry squads were widely scattered

and each fighting on its own.

This part of North Africa was semidesert, reminding the Americans a lot of California. Between the mountains and desert stretches there were valleys of fertile land under cultivation.

Shortly the four members of the Rat Patrol came to what had been an olive grove before the battle moved across it. The trees were shattered and many had been uprooted by the bombs and high explosive shells. The farmhouse looked as if an earthquake had hit it.

"There was a whale of a fight here," Tully observed as they plodded through the devastation.

Troy nodded. "This war is getting rough," he said. "Wait here a minute. I've got to get our bearings. We've got to head toward our troops so we can get transportation back to the command post."

One corner of the farmhouse was still standing. It was two stories, with heavy mud-brick walls. Troy started to climb up it. The rain had made the walls slippery. He was halfway up when he started to slide. He hit the ground hard. It was a sickening fall, for his body was already bruised

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from the punishment he had taken when the wadi bank caved in on him.

Before he could get up, Tully Pettigrew was climbing the wall. Tully got as far as Troy had and paused to get a better grip on the slippery bricks.

That pause saved his life. A German rifle cracked in the darkness. The slug struck the brick above Tully's head. He was stung by the flying bits of hardened mud.

He let go, dropping to the ground. He hit, slipped, and slammed into Troy, who was trying to get up. Both of them rolled back against the wall, hugging the shattered hull of the house for what protection it could give them.

Jack Moffitt was carrying their sole tommy gun. The submachine gun with its remaining rounds of ammunition was their only effective weapon besides the bowie knives they all carried. Hitchcock had an empty rifle and Troy's .45 also was without ammunition.

While the others tried to hide as best they could in the tumble of the wrecked house, Moffitt crawled in a circle toward the place where he

thought the shot came from. It appeared to be a bomb crater just beyond the wreckage of an olive-oil press.

An uprooted tree blocked his way. He skirted it, rising in a half-crouch to move faster. It was nearly a fatal mistake.

A machine gun started to chatter. Moffitt flattened out behind the heavy roots of the tree. Slugs slammed into the wood. The Englishman lay still, his finger on the tommy-gun trigger, as he tried futilely to see something to shoot back at.

To his right Hitchcock was taking advantage of the diversion Moffitt was creating. With the Germans' attention on the Englishman, he crawled straight for the shell hole.

On the opposite side Tully and Troy were moving in a similar manner to catch the Nazi soldiers in a three-way attack.

Moffitt had his tommy gun up, ready to fire. As yet he had not seen a clear target and hesitated to waste ammunition.

Although Troy had issued no orders, each knew exactly what the others were doing. They had worked together so many times on raids in the



past that they had come to think alike.

Moffitt stretched his legs, getting ready to advance again. Since he had the only gun, he had to be the backbone of the attack. The others were armed only with knives.

As he started to move, there was a slight noise behind him. He turned quickly, swinging the muzzle of the tommy gun around to face the new danger.

"Sarge!" It was Tully Pettigrew's voice.

"Yes?" Moffitt replied softly.

"Troy wants you to join him," Tully reported. "We're in a mess. We've stumbled into a Jerry command post."

"I knew we'd hit one if we stayed on the road," Moffitt said. "But I thought there would be sufficient movement about to warn us."

"This must be a special one. It's small and well camouflaged," Tully said. "Troy said to tell you not to shoot. He wants to let the Jerries' nerves quiet down and then see if he can make off with a patrol car or something."

"Down, Tully!" Moffitt whispered, his voice tense with urgency.

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As he spoke, a flashlight beam shot out from the hidden German guard pit. Both men flattened out in the mud. The misty beam cut across their prone bodies without stopping. They were so covered with mud that they blended perfectly with the ground.

In the distance a voice called out in German. Moffitt was the only member of the patrol who understood the language. He quickly translated for Pettigrew.

"We've had it now, Tully!" Moffitt whispered. "What Jerry said was, 'You're right! There was somebody there by the wall. I've found his hat!'"

Pettigrew puckered his lips as if he was going to whistle, but he kept silent. "Must be Troy's," he whispered back. "Dropped when he fell off the wall."

"Possibly," Moffitt agreed. "Now that they know we are here, they'll rake every mud puddle within ten miles to find us."

"We'd better start getting out fast," Tully said.

"We've got to make contact with the others," Moffitt replied. "Where did you leave Troy?"

"On the other side of the olive grove, but he

was moving ahead. No telling where he and Hitch are now."

"Okay," the Englishman said. The American slang sounded strange spoken in his clipped British accent. "Then we must navigate by dead reckoning. Give the old boat full power and set a course dead ahead!"

"Huh?" Pettigrew said.

"They'll expect us to run away," Moffitt explained. "They'll be searching in that direction. So we will go the other way, which is straight into the middle of their command post!"

"Whew!" Tully said. "You're either completely crazy or mighty smart. So let's get going and find out which!"

"If you happen to be a betting bloke, I'll lay you two-to-one odds that Troy is thinking the same thing," Moffitt whispered. "Come on."

They crawled forward as rapidly as possible, snaking through the mud almost to the edge of the machine-gun emplacement. They ducked down again as the light swung back their way.

In the distance an angry German voice demanded to know what the light was for.

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"He's giving them the Old Harry for showing a light," Moffitt whispered to Tully. "He says there are some American one-hundred-and-five-millimeter guns over the hill. He doesn't want them to pinpoint this target."

"We have been infiltrated by the enemy, *Herr Kapitan*," the German soldier explained.

"Are you sure?" the German officer asked suspiciously, peering at the soldier.

"We found this hat."

Moffitt could not see what was happening, but he glimpsed the slight flash of a well-shielded flashlight. It was on just for a second.

Then the listening Englishman heard a shocked exclamation from the German officer.

"This is not American! This is an Australian bush hat!" he said in a thick, guttural voice. "Something is wrong with our Intelligence! There are supposed to be only Americans in this sector. Could the enemy have sent in Australian reinforcements? This had better be reported to the captain. There is too much at stake here to take any chances. Corporal Schmidt! Get Captain Dietrich!"

"I'm here, Wolfgang," another and quite familiar voice spoke out of the rain. "What is the matter?"

"That's Dietrich's voice," Tully whispered in Moffitt's ear. "I'd recognize it anywhere. That means that the test tank must be here. What is he saying?"

"Quiet!" Moffitt hissed. "I'm having enough trouble hearing in this rain!"

He heard the German panzer officer say, "Corporal Schmidt found this Australian hat after he fired at an intruder. It looks as if our Intelligence was wrong."

"Let me see it," Dietrich said.

Moffitt missed the other officer's reply, but he clearly heard what Dietrich said next: "No, Captain Stroheim, I think our Intelligence is right. We are only facing the Americans. This hat—I am certain—is not from an Australian, but was dropped by an American sergeant who wears it as a souvenir of his service with the Aussies."

Moffitt heard the other officer gasp, "The Rat Patrol!"

"When we crossed Wadi Sidi Nail I thought I

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glimpsed him running around a tank I blew up," Dietrich said. "But I dismissed the idea. Sgt. Sam Troy goes into battle in a jeep, not a tank. . . . But perhaps I was wrong. This has to be his hat."

"If he is here, that means he knows about Project X."

"Exactly!" Dietrich snapped out the word. "And the High Command is putting their last hopes for winning in North Africa upon this new weapon."

"I'll assign every available man to scour the area," the other captain said. "They can't get away!"

"I wish I could be as sure," Dietrich said gloomily. "A dozen times I thought I had those four cornered, and they always managed to slip away."

"They are *rats*, slashing and murdering in the dark and then scurrying back to their holes!" Capt. Wolfgang Stroheim said savagely.

"No, not rats," Dietrich said in a tight voice. "If I had one full panzer division made up of men like those four, I'd give the Führer back the rest of the Army and then drive the British and Americans into the Mediterranean."

"You have admiration for the *enemy*?" Stroheim cried in a shocked voice.

"No! Not for the enemy!" Dietrich snapped. "But for good soldiers. And they are good soldiers. The very best. So good, in fact, that I'll never rest until I see them buried!"

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm taking the Mark 6 Tiger tank back to Tunis for a shakedown," Dietrich said. "I have all the battle data I need, anyway, and I'm afraid to stay around much longer if the Rat Patrol is on to us."

"Shall I break up the post? We were only set up to serve you."

"Let me get away first with the Tiger tank," Dietrich said. "I don't want a lot of activity in here that might draw more American attention. Then spread your men out. Find those Americans regardless of the cost. I promise you that the High Command will be so happy they will personally confer the Iron Cross on the man who kills them!"

"They won't get away from me, Hans!" Wolfgang Stroheim said.

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The two German officers moved away in the rain, still talking, but their words were no longer audible.

"What is it?" Tully whispered.

"Dietrich knows it is the Rat Patrol," Moffitt replied hurriedly. "Come on. We must move fast."

Keeping to his original plan, Moffitt went straight into the German camp. The machine-gun nest they surprised was on the perimeter. The trucks, containing tank repair machinery, were clustered farther back in a slight depression. They were covered with camouflage nets.

The two men dived under a truck to hide from a squad of double-timing German soldiers who came past. A noncommissioned officer's voice blared out a command that Moffitt couldn't make out.

Jack tried to decide on the best line of attack. Stroheim was ringing the area with guards. It would be difficult for the Rat Patrol to break out with only one weapon—the tommy gun he carried.

Being trapped inside an enemy camp was certainly nothing new to any of them. It was part of

their demolition work to make such penetrations. But they always went prepared, well armed and with grenades and plastic explosives. In addition, they always had their two jeeps hidden within a close distance.

It was, Moffitt admitted, one of the toughest spots he had been in since he joined the Rat Patrol.

His major problem now was a reunion with the rest of the patrol. Ordinarily they set up a rendezvous point before they went in on an attack, but that had been impossible this time. Everything had happened too fast.

He waited until the German soldiers were safely past and then whispered softly to Pettigrew, "Come on. We've got to make contact with Troy."

The two men moved forward, slipping under a line of trucks. They came out beside one that had been converted to a mobile machine shop. The rear door was partially open. Moffitt could see the dim outline of a man hunched over a lathe. Sparks were flying from the spinning metal as he worked feverishly to cut a part for a tank.

"He is probably wearing heavy goggles to protect his eyes," Moffitt whispered to Tully. "And

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he must have a gun. We need it."

"We'll get it," Tully said confidently.

"I'll keep you covered from here," Moffitt whispered. "Don't take any chances. We can't afford an alert."

Pettigrew nodded. He moved forward swiftly, with the practiced smoothness of someone who had had a great deal of experience at this kind of work.

He slipped quickly up the three steps at the back of the enclosed truck. The door was partially open, but not enough for him to squeeze through. He grasped the knob to ease it open more.

At that moment a flare burst in the rainy sky. Pettigrew threw himself back off the steps, trying to get out of sight before the machinist saw him.

He could not see Moffitt. He scrambled between the truck wheels, tightly grasping the unsheathed bowie knife—his only weapon.

In the sky the flare flickered in the driving rain. It had been dropped low to come in under the cloud cover.

Pettigrew looked up anxiously. The parachuting light was dropping at a windblown angle

that would shortly take it behind the hills rising to the south of the valley. By Tully's calculations, the light would last about another two minutes, but in that time they could easily be discovered.

Tully twisted his head around, anxiously watching the falling flare. But just as he was starting to think that the light would go out before anyone discovered them, the machinist abandoned his lathe. He came to the door and yelled loudly. Tully could not understand his words, but there was no mistaking the alarm in the soldier's voice.

The machinist leaped off the doorsill without bothering with the steps. Tully saw him raise a rifle and aim at someone Pettigrew couldn't see.

The German's back was toward Tully. The American rolled from under the truck and jumped to his feet. As he lunged at the Nazi, with his bowie knife upraised, Tully saw that it wasn't Moffitt the German was aiming at—it was Mark Hitchcock.

Mark realized his danger. He tried to run. His feet slipped in the mud and he fell flat. The German swung his rifle barrel to draw a swift bead on the fallen American.

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Tully lunged at him, but his own feet slipped in the mud. He groaned in an agony of fear for his friend.

But before the German could fire, Sam Troy hurled a knife from behind one of the trucks. In the rain his aim was a fraction high. The knife blade clanged against the German's helmet.

It was enough to send his shot astray. Before he could fire again, Tully hit him with a football tackle. The two men went down in the mud with a splash.

The German twisted frantically, trying to get his gun barrel against the American's body. Tully grabbed his wrist. The German jerked free and managed to slam his gun butt against Tully's head.

The Kentuckian sagged. His head dropped into the mud. He didn't lose consciousness, but for a moment he was completely unable to move. Dimly he heard Moffitt's tommy gun blasting a savage burst. Then he felt the body of the German slump into the mud beside him.

Suddenly the light went out. In his partially dazed condition, he first thought that he was

blinded. Then he realized that the flare had fallen all the way to the earth.

Other soldiers, attracted by the gunfire, came running toward them.

Moffitt fired another burst to slow the Germans down. They dived for cover and hit back at him with a ragged fusillade. Troy and Hitchcock grabbed Tully's arms and dragged him back between two lines of parked vehicles.

Moffitt had moved off in the opposite direction. He kept firing an occasional short burst to draw the enemy's attention from the other three men.

"I—I c-can make it now," Tully whispered.

They pulled him to his feet. Tully leaned heavily against a truck tire. His head throbbed from the blow, but he was rapidly regaining control of his body.

Off to the right there were shouts and continued firing as the Jerries closed in on Moffitt. Then above the noise of the battle and the hammer of the rain there was a coughing roar and the ground started to shake.

"The Tiger tank!" Troy said. There was heavy disappointment in his voice. "Dietrich is taking

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it out of here. There goes our chance to knock it out."

"What'll we do now, Sarge?" Hitchcock asked.

"Might as well go home, Mark," Troy replied.

"I wish I knew how!" Tully put in.

"We'll find a way," Troy said, a positive snap in his voice. "Can you drive a Volkswagen, Tully?"

"Sure," Pettigrew said quickly. "What is a Volkswagen?"

"Hitler's answer to the jeep. There's one just behind this truck. Get it started. There's no key. The ignition switch is on the panel. The starter is on the floor. Keep the engine running until Mark and I get back."

"What—" Mark began.

"No time to explain," Troy said hastily. "We must move while there's enough noise to cover us. Come on, Mark!"

Troy and Hitchcock slipped off into the rainy darkness. They retraced the route they took coming in. The Rat Patrol leader's sharp mind had missed nothing as they slipped into the German camp. His plan had formed as he went along.

After a short distance Troy stopped. Behind them the volume of gunfire was increasing. Hitch looked back, but the rain and darkness were so thick he could not see the muzzle fire of the guns.

"I missed the turn," Troy whispered. There was exasperated impatience in his voice. "What a time to make a mistake! We need every split second now."

They went back about ten feet. Hitch bumped against the side of some kind of vehicle.

"This is it!" Troy whispered. "There's a dip here that sweeps down to the macadam road in front of the farmhouse. You remember. We climbed it coming in."

"Yeah," Hitch said.

"Okay, get behind this thing. I'm going to release the brake. It's parked at the edge of the incline. If we can give it a hard enough shove, it should roll right on down to the road—I hope."

Hitchcock made his way around to the back. The vehicle, he found, was a quarter-ton pickup truck. He braced his shoulder against the tail gate and dug his feet into the mud to get solid footing.

In front, Troy got down on his knees to make

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sure there was nothing blocking the front wheels. He reached in the cab to release the hand brake. Then he slipped off his pistol belt and secured the steering wheel to keep the rolling vehicle on a straight course. Finally he switched on the lights, which glowed dimly through the blackout slits in front.

He ran back to Hitchcock. "*Now!*" he whispered anxiously.

They threw their full strength against the truck. It only rocked slightly.

"*Again!*" Troy whispered, his tone urgent. "Everything depends on it!"

Still the truck did not move enough to start rolling. The two men got it to rocking and then when Troy said, "*Now,*" they gave a final, desperate heave.

The pickup moved, then started down the incline. Troy cupped his muddy hands to his mouth and screamed loudly to attract attention.

They heard a shout, a command from Captain Stroheim. In answer the German guns swung from their assault on Moffitt to the rolling pickup. A light flashed out of the darkness to illuminate

the back of it. Sparks flashed as bullets struck the steel sides.

The enemy gunfire whipped a deadly stream above the heads of the two Rat Patrol men. They flopped on their stomachs and started to crawl.

The Jerry soldiers came running past them. One caught his boot in Mark's side. He sprawled flat. Mark lay still, not daring to move.

4 | *The Spy in Tunis*

ACROSS FROM Mark Hitchcock, Sam Troy lashed out with his knife. The German soldier gave a choked cry and fell back in the mud.

The two Americans kept down until the rest of the enemy squad went past, running madly after the rolling truck. Then, grabbing the muddy gun from the dead soldier, Troy whispered for Mark to follow him. Together they quickly made their way back to where Tully Pettigrew had the Volkswagen's engine running.

"Wait here, Mark," Troy said. "I'll get Jack."

"Stop wasting time, Sam!" a clipped English voice whispered out of the dark. "I'm here and ready to go home. Just show me the way!"

"Get in the Volks," Troy snapped. "Move over, Tully. I'll take the wheel. As for the rest of you, hang on if you can. This isn't an airplane, but I intend to make it fly!"

He put the armored patrol car in gear and let out the clutch. The car jerked and the engine died.

"What—" Jack Moffitt began.

"I forgot that the blamed thing doesn't shift like American transmissions," Troy said, disgust in his voice. "We're off now."

He started slowly, trying to attract as little attention as possible. To his right the Nazi gunners were zeroing in on the rolling truck, thinking they were trying to escape in it. It burst into flames as tracer bullets ignited the gas tank. It careened wildly and turned over.

While the Germans' attention was on the burning truck, Troy expertly guided the Volkswagen past the machine-shop truck and toward the high-

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way. The rain was still falling, but the gasoline-fed fire in the truck defied the falling water.

Sam Troy shot the roaring flames an anxious glance as he steered for the open road. The fire would prevent the Germans from immediately finding out that they had been tricked—provided the firelight did not betray the Rat Patrol as they tried to sneak away.

There was a machine gun mounted in the rear of the Volkswagen, but Tully inspected it with disappointment. He leaned over and told Troy that the last gunner had failed to replenish the ammunition.

"I doubt that I've got more than a couple of rounds left in my clip," Moffitt said, shifting the tommy gun in his hands.

"There's a partial clip left in this thing," Hitchcock said, inspecting the German rifle Troy had passed to him when they got in the Volkswagen patrol car.

"Use it and then throw rocks at them!" Troy snapped.

The rain suddenly slackened. The armored patrol car was now almost even with the ruined

farmhouse where the Rat Patrol first encountered the enemy outpost as they came along the road.

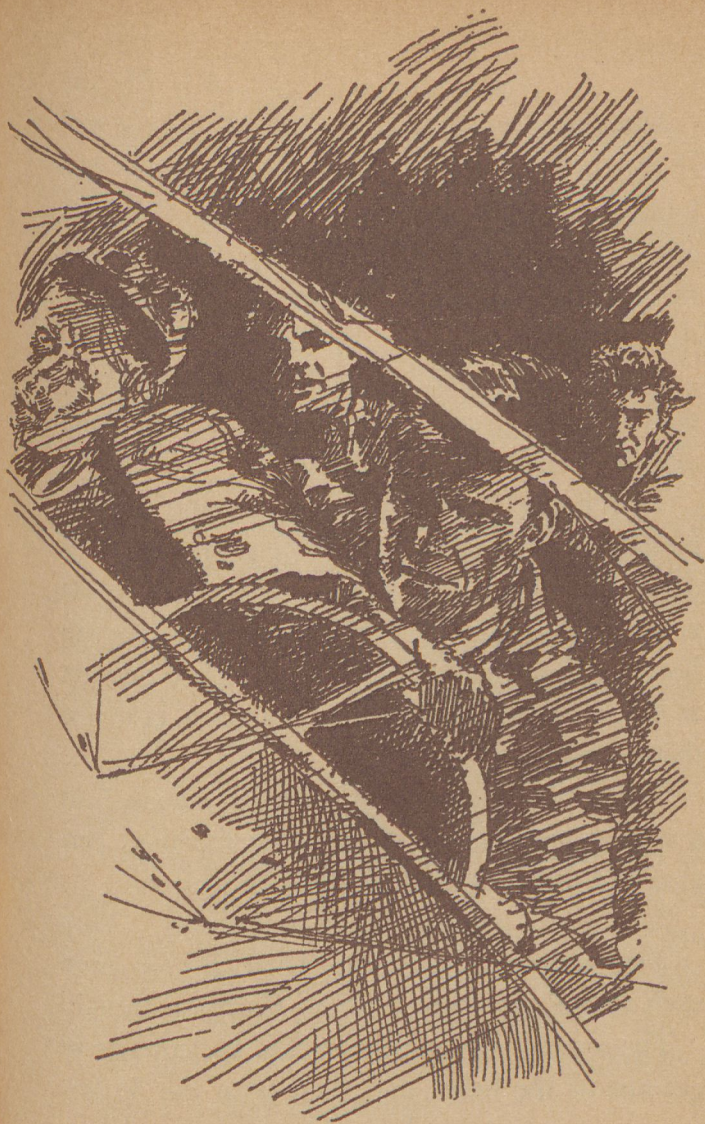
"If we can get that wall between us and the fire, we might have a chance to slip away clean," Troy said.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a bullet struck the armored fender. The four men ducked. Bullets started coming at them from all directions. Troy whipped the wheel around in a frantic attempt to escape. Then a submachine gun cut loose at them.

Troy cut the wheel sharply to stop his skid. He jammed down on the accelerator again, whipping from right to left to present as difficult a target as he could.

The Volkswagen's front wheels hit a hole. The patrol car bounced high and came down with a sickening jolt. There was a loud crack from underneath the chassis, but it did not stop the sturdily built vehicle.

They hit a pool of water going at top speed and skidded again. Troy expertly brought the skid under control and the Volkswagen darted behind the mud-brick wall.



Momentarily safe from the hail of lead thrown at them, Troy skirted a huge bomb crater and braked sharply to make the turn onto the macadam strip—part of the highway that led over the mountains to Tunis. He turned in the opposite direction.

As he did, a searchlight picked them up. There was a scream over their heads and a shell burst almost directly in front of them.

Troy turned quickly to avoid running directly into the hole. Mud and dirt came peppering back down upon them. As the Volkswagen spun around they glimpsed the Tiger tank, partially silhouetted by the searchlight. The turret was turning as Capt. Hans Dietrich tried to get a bead on them again.

There was another earthshaking *whoom!* as a second shell exploded. It struck the road just ahead of them, closer than the previous one.

"We're not going to make it this way," Troy said through clenched teeth. "Dietrich's too good with that eighty-eight cannon. Hang on tight!"

The searchlight hit them again. He cut fast to get out of the beam and then spun the Volks-

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wagen around to head back the way they had come.

He drove only a short distance and then shifted into four-wheel drive and lurched over the lip of a bomb crater.

The searchlight beam from the Tiger tank flashed across the top of them, but they were down low enough so that Captain Dietrich in the Tiger tank could not see them.

At Troy's quick order the Rat Patrol leaped from the Volkswagen. It was leaning at almost a forty-five-degree angle. The front wheels were jammed into the loose dirt at the bottom of the hole. Its rear wheels were elevated on the sloping side of the crater.

"Quick!" Troy rasped. "Plaster it with mud. That'll help camouflage the car!"

Working rapidly, they grabbed handfuls of wet dirt and smeared it over the car. The ground was shaking and the rumble of the approaching tank was growing louder. At a word from their leader, the Rat Patrol pressed flat against the sloping sides of the crater. The mud they wallowed in made a perfect camouflage.

The rain, now that they really needed its cover, was letting up. Twisting his head, Troy could see the dark form of Capt. Hans Dietrich raised out of the Tiger tank's hatch as it went past them.

Tully Pettigrew turned his head. "It looks like we made it, Sarge," he said.

"Oh, we'll make it, but we haven't got it made yet," Troy replied.

Up on the road, Dietrich took his monster tank down another half mile. When he was unable to locate the stolen Volkswagen, he turned back. The Rat Patrol dug back in the mud as the big tank rumbled past them again.

When it was gone they gathered around the Volkswagen. The rain started again.

"What do we do now?" Tully asked Troy.

"They think we got away," the Rat Patrol leader said. "We wouldn't want Captain Dietrich to be wrong, would we? So let's get away!"

"We're going to have one heck of a time getting out of this hole," Mark said.

"This desert land is packed hard," Troy said. "It gets muddy on top, but underneath it's real hardpan. We'll dig the mud off the slope. Then,

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with all of us pushing, we should make it."

It sounded easy enough, but it was three hours before the struggling men finally got the patrol car up the side of the bomb crater and back on the road.

They followed the highway for about two miles and then, when the rain stopped again, headed straight across a flat desert area toward what they hoped were the American lines. Here they left the slick, muddy, cultivated area behind and were on hard-packed sand. The Volkswagen zipped along at top speed.

After about an hour they had to take cover again. The tank battle in the rain was over. Both sides, running low on gasoline, were pulling back to their previous lines. The furious fight had ended in a stalemate. They hid in a wadi until the retreating Germans passed and then resumed their journey.

"I hope you haven't forgotten this is an enemy vehicle," Jack Moffitt reminded Troy. "The first Yank who sees us is going to shoot."

"You're right," Troy said. "We had better take it easy from here on in."

About a half hour later the sky started to lighten with the coming dawn. Troy kept going until he saw in the distance three American half-tracks—trucks with tractor treads in the rear. He cut over and headed toward them, prudently stopping just out of range of their machine guns.

The four men got out of the Volkswagen and stood with their hands over their heads while the Americans approached.

A sergeant in the lead vehicle held a tommy gun on them as his half-track came to a halt.

"*Kamerad*," Moffitt said. "In case you Yankee blokes can't understand plain German, that means 'We surrender, *please*, sir.'"

The sergeant started. He looked suspiciously at the four men. Then he banged down his gun with a disgusted grunt.

"The Rat Patrol!" he snorted. "Just my luck. I could see myself getting a medal from General Ike himself for capturing four Jerry generals!"

"Better luck next time, Charlie," Troy said. "How about guiding us back to the command post so an itchy-fingered GI doesn't take a potshot at us?"

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They crossed a range of hills and it was morning by the time they arrived at the American camp. It was hardly noticeable a mile away. The tents were painted in varying colors to blend with the terrain, and camouflage nets were stretched over tanks and trucks. The vehicles were also painted with irregular designs, but the nets were still needed to break up characteristic shadows that might give them away from the air. A cactus hedge, used by a long-gone Arab farmer to mark his boundary, outlined the outer limits of the camp.

While the other three went to clean up, Sergeant Troy went directly to the Intelligence tent to report on their mission.

Capt. Frank Haynes, the Intelligence officer, looked up, startled, when Troy came in.

"You look like a walking mud puddle," he said. "Tough mission?"

"About the usual," Troy said. "We got two of those ammunition dumps at Sidi-bou-Ibn."

"Good!" Haynes said. "We only expected you to blow up one."

"And on the way back we ran into Capt. Hans

Dietrich testing a new German tank," Troy added. "A big one."

Haynes had been slouching in a camp chair behind a rough wooden desk covered with terrain maps. He sat up quickly, his face suddenly grim.

"Some of the tank commanders reported seeing what looked like an iron monster coming at them out of the dark," he said. "I thought they were just seeing things."

"They were seeing something, and I really mean *something*," Troy replied. "It mounts an eighty-eight cannon and the track tread must be twice as wide as our M-3's."

"That can outgun and outrun anything we have in North Africa," the Intelligence officer said. "This is serious."

"I figured it was pretty bad," Troy replied.

"It is worse than you realize," Haynes growled. "Look at that blasted map. Here's the new battle line. The Jerries have not only stopped us cold—they are pushing us back in some areas all the way to the Medjerda River. If they have a secret weapon like this, they can do just about anything they want."

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He got up. "The Old Man said he would scalp anybody who bothers him before he gets the next battle planned, but he had better hear this."

They walked across the area to a pyramid tent set just back of three parked medium tanks. A gray-haired man with a face as rugged as granite was hunched over a map spread over a bare board table. He had the receiver of a field telephone at his ear while his feet warmed at a "desert stove." This was a hole in the ground with gasoline mixed with sand burning in it.

He looked up as they entered. "Come over and warm yourselves," he grunted. "Dang my hide if I don't volunteer for the Arctic next time there's a war. Maybe you can keep warm up by the polar regions. You sure as heck can't on this blasted desert. I—"

He broke off as a voice started to speak from the other end of the line.

"No, sir, General," they heard him say. "Somebody must be putting out Nazi propaganda. There certainly hasn't been any secret German weapon in operation in our sector. I—"

Haynes made a frantic wave of his arms to

draw the colonel's attention.

"Just a minute, sir," he said. "I have just received an Intelligence report on last night's battle."

He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Quick!" he snapped. "What is it?"

"Jerry is testing a larger tank known as the Mark 6 Tiger," Troy said in a low voice that would not carry over the wire. "Capt. Hans Dietrich of the Fourth Panzer is in charge of testing. It has an eighty-eight cannon."

The colonel's shaggy eyebrows came down in a startled frown. He swallowed hard when he thought of what this could do to his light and medium tanks.

"Yes, sir," he said briskly into the field phone. "We are *right* on it, General. . . . Yes, our men have verified that a new German tank is in operation. It's the Tiger our Intelligence said Hitler was working on. Apparently they got it out quicker than our brainy boys in headquarters Intelligence thought."

He listened for a short time, then said, "Of course, sir, we are on the ball in this outfit. Nothing gets past *us*. Your information is not

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exactly right, sir. It is not a full battlefield commitment on the new tank. It's a test—a combat test. . . . Yes, sir, it is under the direction of a Capt. Hans Dietrich. . . . Where is the test tank now, sir? Why, I—uh—would say it was about—”

He paused and motioned frantically to Troy, who stabbed his dirty finger at Tunis on the map in front of the colonel.

“—er—about—halfway back to Tunis, sir. That's where Dietrich is taking it. . . . Yes, sir, you are absolutely right, sir,” he added after a brief pause. “They are taking it back to Tunis for a shakedown and to make a full combat report.”

He listened for a few more minutes and hung up when the general broke the connection.

“Good job, Troy,” he said to the Rat Patrol leader. “You had better get some rest. We are going to make another stab tomorrow, and I want your gang to blow up the ammo dump the Nazis have at Camel Point.”

“We lost our jeeps, Colonel,” Troy said. “We need another.”

“We're short ourselves,” the colonel said.

"Those pressed-pants Johnnies back at headquarters in Casablanca get everything while the man fighting the war has to scratch. Anyway, we got to get that ammo dump. Tell the motor pool officer I said to give you what he has. I don't care whose jeep it is."

When the Rat Patrol returned the next evening after a highly successful attack on the Camel Point supply center, the motor pool sergeant had an urgent message for Sam Troy.

"The colonel wants to see you, and the old boy has fire in his eye," the sergeant said. "I'd rather face a panzer division alone than see the Old Man in the mood he's in."

"What's eating him now?" Troy asked.

"I'll let him tell you, but remember to keep me out of it. You told me he said to do it."

Still bewildered, Troy went directly to the headquarters tent. Colonel Brize let out a roar when he saw him.

"What in the blazes was the idea of taking *my* jeep!" he roared. "I had to ride the back end of a blasted tank into battle!"

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"You said to take anybody's jeep," Troy said. "And yours was the only one left."

"I meant anybody's but mine, naturally," the colonel snapped. "Any idiot would have known that. I'm fed up with your insubordination. You are the worst soldier in this entire division! You look like a tramp and you act like a civilian! I'll bet you haven't saluted an officer in six months. I intend to personally take you in hand and make a soldier out of you if it kills us both! I—"

An orderly stuck his head through the tent flap. "Sir—" he began.

"Get out!" the colonel shouted. "I intend to—"

"Sir," the orderly insisted. "The general is here. He just came from division headquarters."

"Oh!" Colonel Brize said hastily. "Come right in, sir! Uh—Troy, that is all. You may go."

The general, a tall man with a face about as rugged as the colonel's, stopped Troy.

"Is this Sergeant Troy of the Rat Patrol?" he asked. "Stay with us, Sergeant. This matter concerns you."

After Colonel Brize hastily pulled up a folding field chair for his guest, the general said, "This

matter was too important to trust to the field phone, Colonel. It's about that Tiger tank."

"Yes, sir," Colonel Brize said. "When it comes back into combat I'll blast it—"

"I'm afraid that is the problem. We can't wait. Now there is no way to stop the German Command from putting all of them they can get into the battle line," the general went on. "What we need to know is the new weapon's weaknesses and strengths so we can adequately defend ourselves against it."

"Yes, sir," the colonel said.

"I have just been informed by General Eisenhower's headquarters in Casablanca that we have a very efficient spy in Tunis. This has been a very carefully guarded secret, but he has furnished us some remarkable intelligence."

"Does he have anything to say about the Tiger tank?" Troy asked.

Colonel Brize frowned at his interruption, but the general did not seem to mind. "Yes," he said, turning to the Rat Patrol leader. "He has verified all Colonel Brize told me. More important, he has a copy of the test report run on the tank before it

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went into combat. He is certain he can get the combat report also."

"This is wonderful!" Colonel Brize said.

"These reports cannot be trusted to the regular coded methods this spy used to get information to us," the general went on. "We must go after them."

"Into Tunis? The headquarters of the entire German Command?" the colonel said in surprise.

"That is suicide, General."

"I think so myself," the general replied. "But this order came directly from General Eisenhower himself. The attempt will be made by two of these pressed-pants know-it-alls from top headquarters. You know, the kind who know all about war because they read all our reports from the battlefield, but who have never heard a shot fired in earnest."

"I know the kind," Brize growled.

"One of them is an Intelligence officer who knows the spy and is needed to make the contact. The other is a former consular official with our embassy in Tunisia before the war. He knows the city."

"I don't think they'll get away with it," Brize

said. "The Gestapo will have their heads."

"That's the way I feel about it, too, but orders are orders," the general said. "Now, about your Rat Patrol. I am detaching them to—"

"What!" Brize shouted, so startled he forgot he was addressing his senior officer. "You can't take them. I need them! Why, the Rat Patrol is worth more to me than a full regiment. They—"

"I know the work they have done, and it has helped win more than one battle for us. But I have no choice. The order has come directly from the top command. Your Rat Patrol is to be detailed to guard these two men and help them get into Tunis to make contact with the spy."

"They'll never get out of it alive," Colonel Brize said slowly.

"There's a chance," the general said. He turned to Troy. "Are you willing to try, Sergeant?"

"Sure!" Troy said quickly.

The general turned to Brize. "They will be re-assigned to your command when they get back. You'll only be losing them for a couple of days or so."

Brize took a deep, unhappy breath. "Troy," he

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said. "Go alert the rest of your team and make preparations."

"Yes," the Rat Patrol leader said, and then, thinking he should make some show of military protocol before the general, added, "sir."

As he dropped the tent flap behind him and started across the compound, Sam Troy considered the odds against them. He was always bold, but never rash. He liked to consider the problems facing them on a raid.

As he turned the problems this project presented over in his mind, he decided that Brize was wrong. It was not a suicide mission. They had a chance—simply because the whole thing was so bold that the Germans might be taken off guard.

5 | *The Major Trouble*

EARLY THE NEXT morning the Rat Patrol was called to Colonel Brize's tent to meet the two officers from Casablanca.

It was as Troy feared. Both were typical staff officer types. They were men who thought that because they served at the top command, where they got the "big picture," they knew more than the fighting men slugging it out in their isolated areas on the battlefield.

Troy noted that they looked shocked when he

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reported without saluting. Since Colonel Brize said nothing, neither man said anything either. It is always an irritation to spit-and-polish headquarters men to see the lack of saluting in the forward zone.

Brize introduced the two to Troy as Maj. Donald Cane and Maj. Frank McCuster. Cane was a little man with a jutting underjaw that made him look like an angry bulldog. McCuster was tall, with the dignity of the ex-diplomat that he was.

"You are familiar with the terrain about Tunis?" Colonel Brize asked Troy.

"Yes, sir," the Rat Patrol leader said. "We blew up a supply depot on the outskirts just before the German push moved us back to the river."

"Okay," Brize said impatiently, as if eager to get the whole project off his hands. "You're on your own. Report to me when you get back."

"We'll leave right now," Troy said. "I have the jeeps ready."

"I think we had better clear up a misunderstanding right now, Sergeant," Major Cane said sharply. "You are not in command of this project. I'll tell you when we leave. It will be tonight when

we have darkness to cover us."

"Sergeant, take your men outside. I want to have a word with the major," Colonel Brize snapped.

As soon as the tent flap dropped behind them, the four men stopped. They could easily hear the colonel's bawling voice.

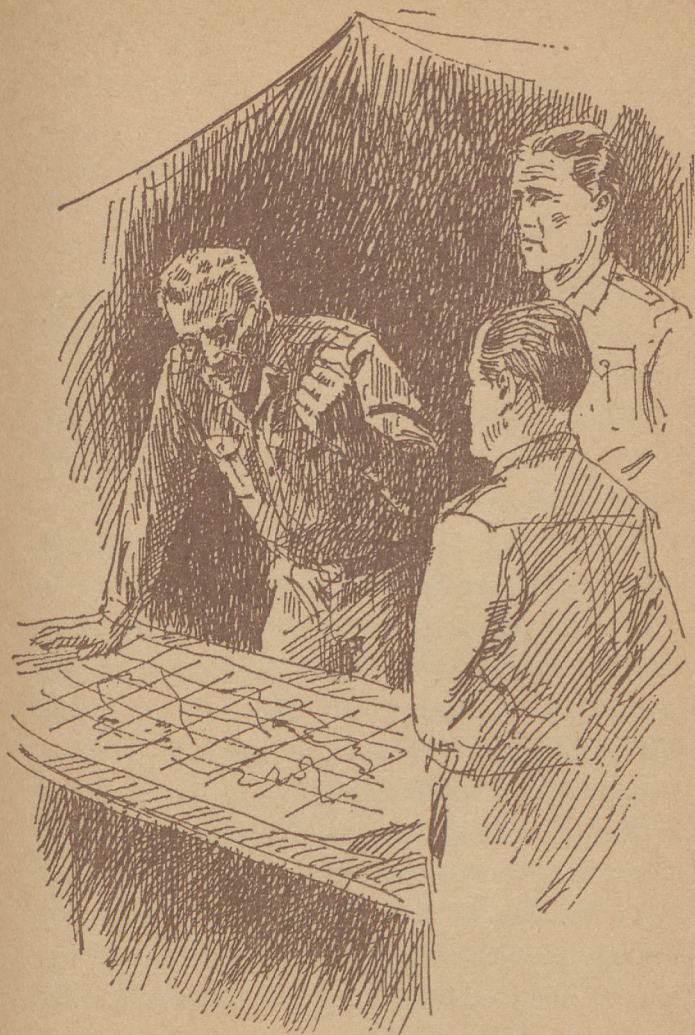
"Major!"

"Yes, sir." It was Major Cane's uneasy voice that replied.

"I am giving up four of the best men in this entire confounded army for your wild-geese chase!" Colonel Brize bawled. "I am doing it under the probably mistaken idea that they are needed. If you think you can get into Tunis without them, go ahead. If not, then you listen to somebody who knows something about this section of Tunisia and one heck of a lot more about fighting in it!"

"But, sir—" Cane began.

Colonel Brize's roaring voice cut him short. "Major! I can see you know nothing about military discipline, custom, or tradition! You're forgetting that I'm a *colonel* and you're a *major*, and



that automatically makes me smarter than you!"

"Yes, sir!" Cane gulped.

"Now that we understand each other," Brize went on, "I am giving you an order, Major. Let Sgt. Sam Troy alone and you'll come out of this mess alive. Not that *that* is any help to the United States Army, but it will get the Rat Patrol back to me, and I need them. Now get moving!"

"Come on," Troy said to his men. "We had better get out of here before those self-appointed generals see us eavesdropping."

"I guess that solves a rather sticky problem in command for us, Sam," Jack Moffitt said.

"I doubt it, Jack," Troy replied. "Those two worthies are too conscious of their rank to pay attention to an enlisted man. There are many fine officers in the Army. It's just our luck to draw a couple of the stuffed shirts."

Arrival of more equipment permitted the Rat Patrol to have two jeeps once again. Moffitt and Mark Hitchcock took one of them. Troy and Tully were in the other. The two officers split up. Major Cane rode with Troy and Major McCuster with Jack Moffitt.

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Cane appeared irritated and didn't so much as say a word to Troy. Glancing over at the other jeep, Troy was surprised to see an apprehensive look on McCuster's face.

It puzzled the Rat Patrol leader. The officer did not look like the kind who would scare easily. Also, he had known all along the terrific odds against them.

"I wonder why he is so nervous all of a sudden?" Troy asked himself.

Thinking back, he decided that McCuster's manner had changed after Colonel Brize had given the two officers a dressing down.

"I guess he's just scared of rank," Troy thought and waved his hand across to Moffitt in a signal to get started.

The rain had stopped, but clouds still hung low and fat with unshed water. They followed the repaired highway to the Medjerda River, crossing on a pontoon ford. Here they turned north. They crossed a fertile section of farmland and olive groves and then hit a section of sticky red gumbo mud. It was so bad they made only about two miles per hour for the next ten miles.

They finally came out on rising ground leading to hills that stepped up to one peak towering hundreds of feet above the surrounding desert.

The road swung south again. Troy left it, cutting across cactus-studded ground much like the desert of Arizona. The hills were badly broken with gorges ripped out by ages of water rushing in torrential floods down the slopes during the winter rains. By climbing one of these land scars with its sandy, rocky bottom, the Rat Patrol jeeps made good time.

It was extremely dangerous, however. If the rain started again, the gorge would swiftly gather runoff from the thousands of washes that fed into it.

The rain held off. They climbed steadily for an hour. Troy looked at his watch. They were nearing the summit and there was about an hour of daylight left. They were on the schedule he had set. But then, about five minutes later, jagged lightning ripped across the sky. Thunder boomed, echoing like cannon-shot in the many ravines. The trees shook with the fury of increasing wind.

The two speeding jeeps were hemmed in by

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steep walls. Water started to cover the sandy bottom of the gorge. Troy jammed down on the jeep's accelerator, going too fast for the terrain and the poor light in the narrow defile.

He had no choice. Within minutes their roadbed would be a rushing river. He knew that then it would be impossible to reach the summit before the flood came.

He sped on for another two hundred yards. He saw a wash leading down into the gorge. He whipped the jeep around, geared down to four-wheel drive, and headed up it. Water rushed past them hubcap deep. Tully looked back. Moffitt was right behind them with the other jeep.

The water diminished as they went higher. Soon Troy found a slope that permitted them to climb out of the wash. They went a short distance but were blocked by a sharp drop.

Troy stopped the jeep, climbing out in the rain to inspect the barrier. Moffitt came over to join him.

"We'll have to go back," Troy said. "I made a mistake."

"It is only about a mile," Jack Moffitt said. "It

isn't far. Then we can take that wash we came through after we blew up that ammunition dump on the other slope."

"It will delay us," Troy said. "We won't be able to get out of the hills by dark. We can't travel over this kind of terrain at night."

"Well, what have you got us into now, Sergeant?" It was the cold, harsh voice of Major McCuster. "Obviously you don't know where you are going."

Troy's face hardened, but he said nothing.

"What are you going to do?" Major Cane asked.

"Go back," Troy said. "There's a way around. We took it last week during the battle."

"Well, I guess you know what you're doing—at least Colonel Brize thinks so," Cane said.

"I'm not so sure!" McCuster snapped. "At any rate, Colonel Brize has no more control over us. I'll take over command now."

Troy stared at him without speaking. McCuster walked over to the edge of the cliff.

"We can't go back and retrace some foggy path the sergeant *thinks* he remembers," McCuster said coldly. "There isn't time. If we move fast enough,

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we can still get back on the original route I mapped out for us. About ten miles north of here there are some friendly Arabs. It was my intention to make contact with them. They have already been paid to smuggle us into Tunis."

"You didn't tell me that," Cane said.

"The less these things are talked about, the less danger of a leak," McCuster said coldly. "Fortunately the sergeant and Colonel Brize haven't completely ruined my plan."

"What are you going to do now?" Moffitt whispered to Troy. "This bloke could easily get us all killed. He doesn't understand this part of the country."

"Or the Arabs," Hitchcock put in. "If you bribe one of them, it's a fifty-fifty chance that you'll be sold out to the Jerries so they can make a profit off of both sides."

"Just play it quiet," Troy said, his jaw set. "I'm not about to let him get us killed. My life isn't worth much, I know, but it's the only one I have. I intend to take care of it!"

McCuster finished his inspection of the bluff and came back to the jeep.

"Sergeant," he said to Troy, "where are those hand grenades?"

"What are you going to do?" Troy asked.

"That is none of your business, Sergeant!" McCuster snapped. "I am in charge here! And furthermore, you had better remember your military courtesy if you know what's good for you!"

The Rat Patrol leader turned to Hitchcock. "Give the major the grenades," he said.

"What are you going to do?" Major Cane inquired. He seemed worried about the trouble between McCuster and Sam Troy.

"Try to get us out of this mess Sergeant Troy's bungling has got us into," McCuster said irritably. "I told you in the beginning I didn't want them along. I had made excellent plans for the two of us to get into Tunis with Arab help. Tripling our number makes it almost impossible now."

"It wasn't my idea. The general insisted on the Rat Patrol going along," Cane said defensively. "But I've seen reports on them. They do a bang-up job."

"Well, you see the mess he's got us in now!" McCuster said irritably. "Stuck on top of a moun-

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tain in a rainstorm! I'm going to knock that cliff down with grenades. Then we can get across in the jeeps."

"Won't the explosions alert the Germans?" Cane wanted to know.

"There're no troops here. After that last battle both sides realized the futility of trying to fight in such broken terrain."

McCuster went back to the bluff. Cane hung back to talk to Troy.

"Is he right about there being no Germans in these hills?" he asked, his face lined with worry.

"Not so far as we know," Troy replied. "He's right about it being too tough to fight in. Armored vehicles can't get in here."

"In the last battle," Moffitt added, "all the guns and ammunition had to be carried in by men. Both sides decided it wasn't worth it."

"Just what did you have in mind by coming up here, Sergeant?" the major asked Troy.

"On the other slope the Jerries abandoned a Volkswagen patrol car when things got tough and they couldn't get it out," Troy said. "We found it and moved it. It's well hidden where we

could find it later. I had an idea about using it on one of our raids."

"And you intended for us to transfer to it?" Cane asked.

"That's right," Troy said. "We'll be in enemy territory after we leave the mountain. In the Volkswagen, in the dark and the rain, we could move forward without exciting suspicion. If we were stopped, Moffitt speaks German like a native."

"You didn't expect to drive right into Tunis, did you?"

"No, but there's a supply train that runs out of Tunis in this direction," Troy said. "I intended to ditch the Volkswagen at El Ettar. There is a steep grade there. The train has to slow. We could catch it easily and smuggle ourselves into Tunis in the cargo."

"Sounds good to me," Cane said. "I'll talk to McCuster. Actually he's in charge, I suppose, since he has date of rank on me. His job is to guide me inside Tunis. He's supposed to know it like the palm of his hand. But I'm the only one the spy trusts to make the contact with."

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"You can talk to McCuster," Troy said, "but I doubt it will do any good. He seems to have very definite ideas about things. Is he with General Eisenhower's headquarters?"

"He used to be with the consulate in Tunis before the war," Cane said. "Then he stayed on with the French underground here in North Africa. He knows the land and speaks Arabic like a native. That's why when we got this important message from the Tunis spy the chief of our Intelligence suggested that he go with me."

"Did the general suggest him, or did the major volunteer his services?"

"I think he did point out to the general his knowledge of Tunis," Cane said. "He said he could get me in, but the general insisted that it was too dangerous to trust to only one man, since anything could happen. He ordered Colonel Brize to send your patrol with us."

"There's something odd—" Troy began, but the rest of his words were swallowed in the boom of an exploding grenade.

Another explosion quickly followed, then a third. After the last explosion McCuster came

back. He spoke to Cane, ignoring the four enlisted men.

"You ride with me," he said to Cane and climbed into the driver's seat of Troy's jeep.

The other three members of the Rat Patrol looked at their leader. Troy shrugged and turned to climb into Moffitt's jeep. The rest followed him.

"What are we supposed to do now, go home?" Moffitt asked.

"Follow his jeep," Troy said. "They're going to need help."

As they went down the slope blasted by the grenades, Moffitt had to admit that McCuster had done a good job in knocking out a path for the jeep.

They got to the bottom with a minimum of sliding and climbed the wash, coming out near the summit of the hill. There was a sharp rise dead ahead. McCuster started up in low, making good time, for it was not too much of a grade. Troy waited until the other jeep was almost to the top, then he slipped his own vehicle into gear to follow.

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But just as McCuster was about to go over the summit he suddenly saw a huge boulder looming up directly in front of him. In his haste to avoid a collision he threw on his brakes too sharply. The jeep's wheels skidded.

The driver tried to cut his wheels toward the direction of the skid to bring himself straight again. There was insufficient room. He hit the front fender against the bole of a fir tree. The jeep spun around and started to slip back down the slope sideways.

There was insufficient room for Troy to pull out of the way. He slammed his own jeep in reverse to minimize the shock of collision as best he could. At the same time he yelled for the rest of the Rat Patrol to jump, but he stayed with the car himself in hope that he might maneuver it out of harm.

The officers' plunging jeep slammed into him, driving Troy's jeep against a mass of rock. There was a sickening crunch of crumpling steel. Troy leaped out just as his jeep turned over.

Troy hit in the mud. He slipped and rolled against Major Cane, who had leaped from the

other jeep. He scrambled up to see Major McCuster shakily pulling himself out of a mud puddle a few feet from them.

"Can we still drive the jeeps?" Cane asked shakily.

Troy walked stiffly around the wreck. The fall revived the ache in his leg caused by the fall he took two days before in the Tiger tank command post.

The Rat Patrol leader made a quick inspection. He stood up, shaking his head.

"They can be repaired, but it looks like a shop job to me. The steering gear is badly bent, for one thing. The other one is completely out. The universal joint has snapped."

"What are we going to do?" Cane asked, worried.

"Colonel Brize said get you to Tunis," Troy said. "And nobody disobeys an order from that old fire-eater. We'll get you there."

Major McCuster turned around. His face was twisted in fury, but he said nothing.

"We'll have to find that Volkswagen," Troy said. "The Jerries abandoned it when it was hit

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by an armor-piercing bullet. We found that the shell knocked out the battery. We pulled it over to a depression and covered it with fir boughs."

"All we need to do is carry a battery from our wreck," Moffitt added.

After pulling the battery from McCuster's wrecked jeep, they started off in single file, following Sergeant Troy. McCuster, still silent, fell in at the rear of the line.

It was hard going uphill carrying the heavy battery. After about thirty minutes they stopped for a breather while Troy made a wide circle to find one of the markers they previously blazed to mark the way to the hidden vehicle.

"Do you think he'll find it?" Major Cane asked Moffitt.

"I'm sure he would if you had said, 'Carry on, Sergeant,'" the Englishman replied.

"What does that mean?" Cane asked.

"Just referring to a little story Hitchcock told us some time ago," Moffitt said.

"It wasn't much of a story," Hitchcock said. "Our First Sergeant told it to us back in basic. It was about an examination given some cadets at

West Point. It asked what they would do if surrounded by the enemy, with bombers overhead about to drop bombs on them, with a dam upstream about to break and flood them, and a landslide about to come down on top of the whole company.

"Well, everybody groaned and tried to remember what the book said. That is, everybody was stumped except one cadet who was an old Army brat. He had been raised on Army posts. He just wrote one sentence across the paper and turned it in. He was the only one who passed.

"The others asked him later what he wrote for an answer. He just smiled and said, 'I put down that I'd just say, "Carry on, Sergeant," and then go back to my tent secure in the knowledge that everything would be taken care of like it should be!'"

Cane grinned rather wryly, but McCuster's face flushed.

"Is that supposed to be a dig at me?" he said angrily. "I'll have you know we wouldn't be in this fix except for Troy's stupidity in bringing us through this wild country."

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"It is the only way to break through the German lines safely," Moffitt said. "They know how tough the terrain is here and that our troops couldn't pull a surprise attack through this area, so they don't have the valley below here strung with outposts. It is the same with us on the other side."

"I had perfect arrangements made with the Arabs," McCuster snapped.

"You trust them more than I do," the Englishman replied.

"I don't have to sit here and argue with an enlisted man," McCuster said stiffly. "I assure you, Sergeant, that your insubordination will be reported, along with the incompetency of Sergeant Troy, just as soon as we return!"

Shortly after this, Troy returned. The expression on his face told them before he spoke that there was new trouble.

"Did you find the Volkswagen?" Tully Pettigrew asked.

"Yes," Troy replied, "but the depression where we hid it is under water."

"But we looked it over before we pulled the

car in there," Moffitt protested. "There was good drainage."

"Blowing up that bank back there caused the runoff water to dam up," Troy said.

"Just a minute, Sergeant!" McCuster snapped. "You are not going to blame your incompetency on me!"

"Have it your way, Major," Troy said coldly.

"This is no time for blaming and quarrelling," Major Cane put in. "What are we going to do now?"

"Can we hike down and meet your Arabs?" he asked the other major.

"It would be morning before we could make it," McCuster said. "That would be too late. Everything depends on making contact tonight."

"It would take us a full day to hike back and get outfitted again," Cane said. "That might be fatal to our whole plan. The spy said the Nazis knew he was there and were making an intense search for him. Any delay could be fatal to him and our chances of getting the report."

"If it were me," Pettigrew said, "I think I'd take that West Point cadet's advice."

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He grinned at McCuster as he said it. As a private, he could hardly be intimidated by threats of being broken in rank.

The angry major glared at him, but Cane said, "It's certainly worth a try. Okay, 'Carry on, Sergeant.'"

6 | *The Sergeant Carries On*

I THINK IT best to go back and look over our jeeps again," Troy said. "Knowing this Volkswagen was here, I didn't make too careful an inspection of the wrecks. There are a few hand tools in the emergency kits. We might be able to take enough parts off one to get the other running."

"How long will that take?" McCuster asked impatiently.

"Who knows until we look?" Troy replied.

They retraced their route back to the wrecks.

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It was almost dark now, but there were flashlights in the standard emergency kits carried in the jeeps.

After a close inspection Troy asked Moffitt to take a look.

"The tie rods are bent so badly on this one that it won't steer," he said after crawling out of the mud. "The ones on the other jeep are in worse shape. We can't use those parts."

"Well, I guess that shoots our mission," Cane said.

"Not yet," Troy replied. "Jack, let's try to straighten that rod."

"We'd have to take it off, and then we would need an anvil and—"

"We'll turn the jeep over so we can get to it and use a pry pole and try to bend it enough to use," Troy snapped. "Come on!"

With all of them helping to lift, they turned the jeep over on its side. The badly bent rod connecting the two wheels in front was clearly exposed. After cutting sapling poles from the firs growing about them, they used the improvised pry poles to bend the rods. The first pole snapped.

They cut another. It broke also. The third held, and they slowly pushed the curve in the rod nearly straight.

"Now try the wheel," Troy said.

Tully Pettigrew leaped to obey. The wheels barely turned when he applied all his strength to the steering wheel.

"Not good enough," he said.

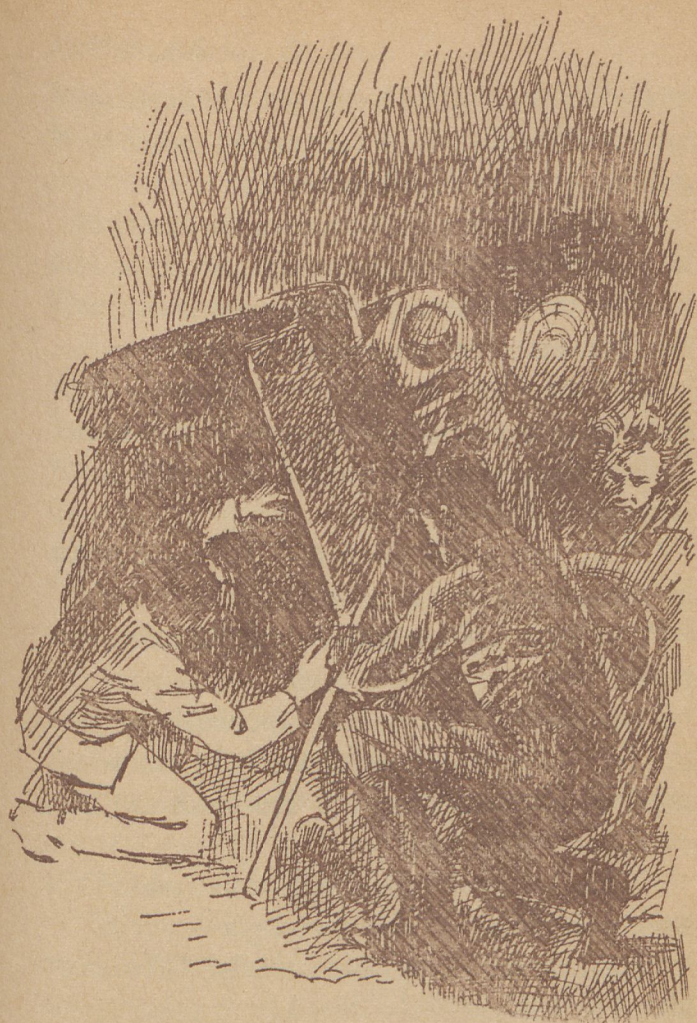
"We can't straighten the rods any better, Troy," Jack Moffitt said. "The trouble is in the pins where the tie rod connects to the wheels. They are bent out of shape."

"Can we beat them back with the hammer?" Mark Hitchcock suggested.

"It's a big risk," Moffitt said. "If they snap off, we're done for."

Troy leaned against the upraised jeep to consider the problem. According to his watch they had already lost two hours. They could not afford to lose much more if they were to make the supply train he hoped would get them to Tunis.

If they failed now, the mission would fail. The Rat Patrol had never failed before and he was determined they would not fail this time. Too



much was at stake. Failure to get that tank report would definitely doom an untold number of Allied soldiers and prolong the war.

"Try hammering on the pins of the other jeep," he said at last. "That should give us some idea how brittle the metal is. If that one holds, we'll try hammering on the others."

The other jeep had turned completely over. Its steering gear was fully exposed. Moffitt started hammering. After the second blow, the metal snapped.

"That settles it," Troy said. "We can't risk breaking the other one. We'll drive it like it is."

"One man can't steer that thing," Moffitt protested.

"I know it," Troy said. "So we'll use two drivers. Tully and I will both hold the wheel until we give out. Then you and Mark can take over. Later we'll spell you."

"Then let's go!" the Englishman said. "We have a lot riding on this, Sam."

"I know it," Troy said soberly. "We can't afford to fail."

It was a tight squeeze to get six men into the

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jeep, but they managed. At first they made slow progress—a combination of the difficult steering and the turbulent trail down the mountain slope.

Every twenty minutes they had to stop to change driving teams. Their arms ached as if their limbs were being pulled from their sockets.

It was such killing work that they did not make the valley until 2:00 A.M.—six hours behind the schedule Troy had set before they left the Army command post. However, they still had time to accomplish what he wanted to do. His spirits were starting to rise again.

Visibility was almost zero, but Troy knew this sector sufficiently well to get along. They crossed a flat depression that was under a foot of water. Shortly afterward—a tribute to his blind navigation—they hit a gravel road.

“Just a minute!” McCuster snapped. “Where are you going?”

“To the railroad,” Troy replied.

“You’re doing nothing of the sort!” the major replied. “Didn’t I tell you I would give the orders? We’re going to El Barid, where my Arab contacts are. Turn around.”

"Have it your way, Major," Troy said mildly. Jammed in between Moffitt and Pettigrew, Mark Hitchcock grinned. He knew that Sam Troy was never so stubborn as when he appeared to be mild. Mark wondered what the Rat Patrol leader would do.

He quickly found out. With Tully Pettigrew helping him strain on the steering wheel, Troy pulled the jeep around in a tight circle. He headed back in the same direction they had been going.

"Stop!" the major snapped. "Which direction are we going?"

"Hard to tell in the dark," Troy said even more mildly than before. "I'll get my compass."

He stopped the jeep. He slipped the compass out of his pocket but deliberately bumped it hard against the metal frame of the seat. Tully, whose leg was jammed against Troy's so they could both hold the wheel, was the only one who noticed the Rat Patrol leader break the compass.

"Hold the flashlight so the major can see the compass," Troy said to Hitchcock, "but keep the light shielded. We're now in Jerry's territory."

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McCuster got partially up in the back to peer at the compass. In the rain he did not notice that the needle pointing north was no longer suspended to turn freely. He settled back, satisfied that his order was being obeyed. Troy slipped the broken instrument back in his pocket.

He let out the clutch on the jeep and started directly south—exactly opposite from the direction Major McCuster thought they were going.

"Fine for now," Moffitt thought. "But what is that stubborn bloke going to say when we end up at the railroad instead of with his Arab friends?"

Twice they had to leave the road when German patrols came splashing by, but they were in familiar territory. Earlier the Rat Patrol made four raids in this sector. This permitted Troy to steer a safe route between the enemy camps.

Soon they started to climb from the valley into the eroded hills. The travel became more difficult, but Troy knew exactly where he was going. The rain and the blackness were no great obstacles to a man who was experienced in working under the worst battlefield handicaps.

"Is this El Barid?" McCuster asked, half-standing in the back of the jeep as he tried to get his bearings.

"I'm not sure what it is," Troy replied mildly. "We'll stop in a minute and try to pinpoint our location."

Shortly afterward he pulled into a muddy depression where the jeep was screened by mud banks.

"End of the line," he said. "We'll cover the jeep and walk the rest of the way."

McCuster climbed down stiffly. The rain had partially slackened. He looked about him.

"This doesn't look like . . ." he began.

Troy waited. Then the major exploded. He turned on the sergeant in a fury.

"You deliberately tricked me!" he shouted.

"If I could make a suggestion," Troy said coldly, "I might advise the major to keep his voice down. We're in enemy territory. There are guards all along this train track."

"I'll have you court-martialed!" McCuster snarled. "You've messed up everything! We'll be lucky now if we come out of this alive!"

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Troy did not reply. McCuster went on: "You've acted as if you don't want us to get to Tunis!"

"On the contrary, *I* want us to get there," Troy said quietly. "Do you, Major?"

McCuster stopped with his mouth open. For a long moment he said nothing, and then he spoke in a low, almost deadly, voice: "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing much," Troy replied. Then, turning to the others, he said, "We're going to catch the supply train. They run all night carrying munitions to the front and bringing back wrecked vehicles for repair in the Tunis shops. With luck we can ride right into the city."

"Did you say the trains slow down here?" Major Cane asked.

"There's a sharp grade and a hairpin turn here," Troy replied. "We'll have no difficulty getting aboard. But remember one thing. When I give the signal, *move!*"

"I'm not going to throw away our whole mission. There's still time to go back and—"

"Major, I hate to say this, since you're an officer and I'm just a sergeant, but I'm under special

orders from Colonel Brize," Troy said. "He heard your plan and he didn't trust it either. He asked me what we should do. I told him and he said, 'Carry on, Sergeant.' I'm carrying on."

"Brize had no right to interfere!" McCuster snapped. "My plan was approved at headquarters."

"Back at headquarters they don't know the front like we do. They come down once a month for inspections—if the fighting is quiet. We're out in it every day. We know how the natives play both sides."

"This will ruin everything!" McCuster said in a stricken voice.

"Major Cane is the one who must make contact with the spy," Troy said. "If you don't want to go on, you know where the jeep is."

"Why didn't Colonel Brize trust me?" McCuster asked in a low, suspicious voice.

Troy did not answer the question. He turned to give instructions to the others.

"Remember, to catch the train run along the tracks until you are going the same speed it is. Then you won't be jerked when you grab the

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handhold at the ends of the cars.

"And be sure you try to board at the front of the car. Then if you miss your grip, you have a good chance of being thrown against the side of the car. If you grab at the rear and miss, you could easily be thrown between the cars and run over."

"How long do you think it will be before another train comes?" Cane asked.

"Supply trains don't run on schedule, Major," Troy said. "But the enemy tries to run as many each night as they can. During the day they are under almost constant attack from our P-38's and Spitfires."

The six men spread along the tracks where they could find cover. Troy kept inching up at intervals to put his ear to the rails. The steel lines carried sound a long distance and he could hear the coming of the wheels long before the train came into view.

It was a long, cold, wet wait—miserably uncomfortable. The rain kept drumming down on them, and desert nights are always cold.

It was almost an hour before dawn when Troy

finally heard the pounding in the rails that announced a train was coming. It was another ten minutes coming into sight. It was a narrow-gauge train—smaller than those that speed along state-side lines. It was running without lights. In the rain it was visible only by the glow in the firebox under the engine.

“Pass the word along for everyone to wait until I’m aboard before they show themselves,” Sam Troy said to Tully Pettigrew, who was just to his right. “That way, if there are guards in the section we board, they won’t see us all.”

The struggling, puffing engine—an antique coal burner—passed by them. Light flared as the fireman opened the door to throw more fuel in the firebox.

Troy let three closed boxcars pass. Next in the lineup were some flatcars with repairable trucks tied on them. He leaped up and ran to the tracks. He kept half doubled up to make himself as unnoticeable as possible. He ran along the track and grabbed the short iron ladder put on each car for the benefit of the brakeman. He swung himself up and got his foot securely on the bottom rung.

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Behind him the others broke and ran to get aboard one of the other two cars.

But as Troy moved to swing up on the bed of the flatcar, a harsh German voice yelled at him out of the rain.

Troy froze where he was, unable to see his challenger. Then the German soldier came from around one of the lashed-down trucks. He had a rifle aimed directly at Troy's chest.

Caught as he was in a cramped position on the ladder, Troy was unable to jump his captor. The train was still struggling upgrade. He could have dropped off into the darkness with a fair chance of dodging the Jerry guard's bullets.

Troy was afraid to take the chance, not because of his own safety, but for the safety of the others. He knew that the guard would alert others. A search would be disastrous for the rest of the Rat Patrol and the two officers.

The guard shouted something to him in German. The Rat Patrol leader yelled back in gibberish, throwing in a couple of "Allahs" to try and fool the guard into thinking he was an Arab.

The guard shouted again. Although Troy

couldn't understand the words, the man's manner indicated that he was ordering Troy to jump off.

The Rat Patrol leader looked down. The train was moving across a high trestle bridging a wadi. In the dark, Troy could not tell how far a fall he would have. In any case, it would be almost certain death.

He yelled back, still using gibberish, but trying to ape the manner of a frightened man pleading for his life.

The guard replied so angrily that Troy knew he had no choice but to drop off the train or risk a bullet in the head.

The guard was moving closer to him, so there was no chance of hanging low on the steel ladder and fooling the German into thinking he had dropped off.

In the split second left to him, Troy estimated the distance between them. He was determined to go down fighting. It was better to try to jump the guard and get shot than to drop to certain death on the rocks below the trestle.

But before he could act, a voice called questioningly in German from the darkness behind

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the lashed-down truck. Troy recognized Moffitt's voice even if he couldn't understand the words.

The guard half-turned to reply, thinking another guard was speaking to him.

Troy cleared the remaining step on the iron ladder but couldn't close the distance between himself and the guard fast enough. The German whirled back around. His finger squeezed the trigger.

Troy threw himself flat on the wooden floor of the swaying car. The bullet skimmed his head. He rolled over and under the truck strapped to the flatcar.

The guard shouted for help. There was an answering shout from the car just behind them, but it was cut off in midsyllable.

Troy rolled out from the opposite side of the truck and started to make his way back to attack the guard again.

He stopped when the guard gave a strangled cry and pitched over the side of the moving car. Troy saw Jack Moffitt step back.

There were loud shouts in German from farther back on the train.

Moffitt shouted back, and the anxious queries stopped.

"I told them I'd shot an Arab who tried to get aboard," Moffitt said in a low, hurried voice. "If they believe me, we will be safe. If they don't. . . ."

The two men waited tensely. They were both armed with .45-caliber Army automatics, but they didn't want a pitched battle now. Everything depended upon riding the train safely into Tunis.

When there was no more noise from the guards on the other cars, the two men moved in back of the truck.

"There seems to be one guard on each car," Moffitt whispered. "Pettigrew took care of the one on the car behind just as he started to yell."

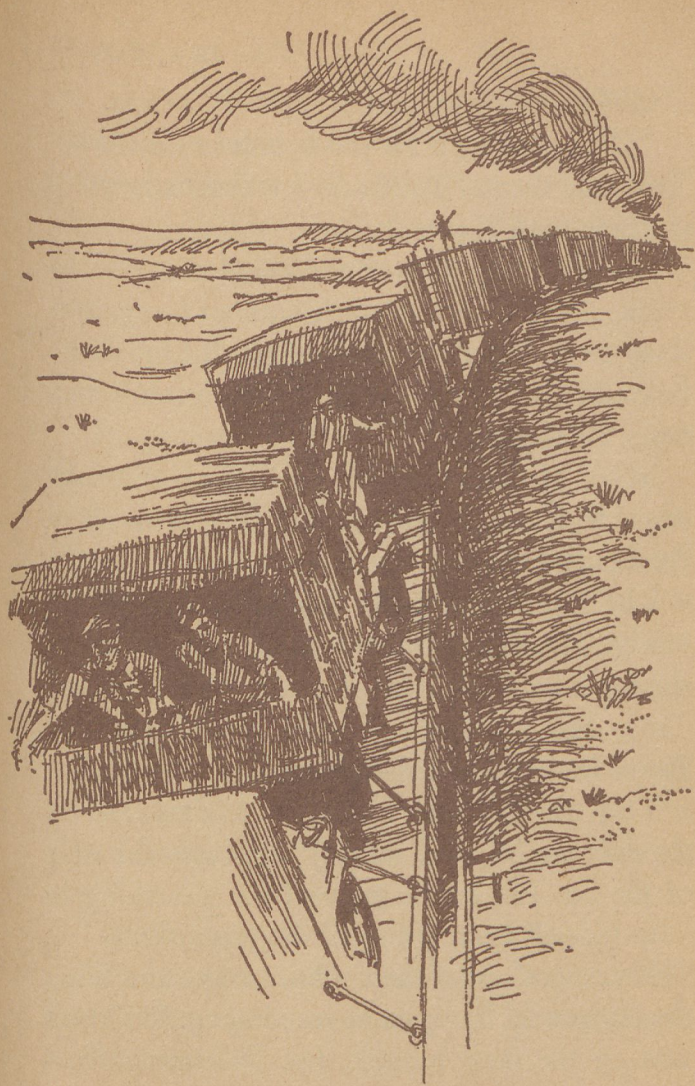
"I heard it," Troy said. "Good job."

"There is also a car of wounded soldiers at the rear," Moffitt reported. "They can still fight if they must."

"Let's not stir them up," Troy said. "Where are the others?"

"On the other car."

"Let's get them up here," Troy said.



Moffitt went back and brought the others.

"The best thing is for you to hide in the truck," Troy told them. "Tully and I will mount guard out here until daybreak."

Pettigrew moved over and crawled under the truck, where he could watch without being seen. Troy moved up to the head of the flatcar, where he could keep an eye out for anyone coming back from the engine.

Major McCuster did not get in the back of the truck with the others. He followed Troy up to the head of the car.

The Rat Patrol leader looked around at the officer. The man suddenly stumbled over one of the ropes lashing down the truck. He fell toward Troy. His outstretched hand caught the Rat Patrol leader's chest, knocking Troy off balance.

Troy tried to catch himself and failed. He hit the floor and slipped. His legs went over the edge of the car. His hands grabbed for something to keep himself from going all the way over.

He caught one of the tie-down ropes and hung on desperately. Tully came running up. McCuster was on the floor himself, but well away from

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the edge of the car. He got up slowly as Pettigrew pulled his leader back to safety.

"Looks like we both almost got it that time," McCuster said in a low voice and turned away. He went to join the others in the back of the truck.

"Troy!" Pettigrew said in an urgent whisper.

"That was deliberate!"

"It's pretty dark, Tully," Troy said. "Are you sure you saw it?"

"Positive!" the Kentuckian insisted. "He deliberately tried to knock you over the side, Troy."

"You could be right," Troy said slowly. "If you are it would explain a lot of things that have been puzzling me."

"What's that?"

"Why McCuster was so anxious to go his way when ours was safer, for one thing," the Rat Patrol leader said. "I think he's really a German spy!"

"That's impossible!" Tully gasped.

"Is it? Just because he came from headquarters? Didn't they catch one on General Montgomery's staff last week?"

"But if he is a spy trying to keep us from getting to Tunis, he could have shot us all on the mountain."

"I think he wants us to get to Tunis—because our spy there is hurting the Germans badly. They can't catch him. They want us to lead them to the spy."

"What are we going to do now?" Tully asked tensely.

"Be obliging!" Troy said with a short laugh. "Give them what they want—but on our terms. Go back and tell Jack I want him out here, will you?"

When Pettigrew left to carry out the order, Troy stared out into the rainy night. His face was grim.

7 | *Treachery*

MOFFITT CAME immediately in answer to Troy's summons.

"What's this about McCuster trying to shove you off the train?" he asked. "Tully told me."

Troy gave him a quick sketch of what happened.

"It is possible that he is a spy," Moffitt said slowly as he considered what Troy had told him. "The Jerries have managed to get their agents into some pretty high places in our Army."

"McCuster has been in Tunisia and Algeria all the time," Troy said. "He has a good record with French and Arab underground units that worked against the Italians and Germans. But that could be a cover. He could be a double agent."

"This might explain something else," Moffitt said. "You know that after we lost the push on Tunisia and got shoved back to the Medjerda River, the general was convinced that the Jerries knew our plans. A spy in McCuster's position could easily have supplied that information."

"Yes, I know," Troy said. "I also know that the general has Counterintelligence working overtime to try and find the leak. McCuster must know that. It could be why he arranged for himself to go on this raid with us. He expected to be found out eventually."

"Possibly," Moffitt replied thoughtfully. "Then if he could use us to find the Allied spy in Tunis, he would pull off a coup that would really raise his stock with his German masters."

"It would also explain why he was so anxious to go his way, Jack," Troy said. "He already had it arranged with the Germans to let us slip

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through. We might have been smart to have gone his way."

"And stuck our heads into a Jerry trap?"

"I think he would have gotten us safely into Tunis," Troy said. "Then when Major Cane contacted the spy, McCuster would have pulled the German Counterintelligence boys down on us all. We'd have been protected by them until the spy was found. If I get another chance, I intend to let him do it."

"We'd be taking a terrific risk," Moffitt said doubtfully. "Sure, it would be an easy way to get us past the city's outposts, but how do we slip out of the trap once we are in?"

"We've had a lot of experience getting out of traps, haven't we?" Troy replied.

Moffitt grinned. Every mission the Rat Patrol made required going into the very center of Nazi operations and then fighting its way out again.

"Okay—if I may be permitted to borrow an Americanism," the Englishman said. "I wonder why he risked giving himself away by trying to kill you?"

"I think I made him suspicious by refusing to

go his way," Troy said. "Then I needled him a little about Colonel Brize not trusting him."

"I see," Moffitt said thoughtfully. "He thinks you are trying to do the same thing he is—that is, using him as bait for a trap."

"That's it," Troy replied. "And he is absolutely right."

"Well! This should be interesting."

"I know—and dangerous," Troy replied soberly. "We have to remember this time that saving our necks is not the major job. I'd like to do that, of course. But our mission is to get Cane in contact with this spy and see that Cane gets back. We're expendable, Jack. That report is everything."

"I read you, Sam," the Englishman said. "But you don't mind, do you, if we put out a little extra effort and do both jobs—getting Cane out with the report and getting back ourselves?"

Sam Troy laughed softly. "Jack, you do that if you can. And I'll be right in there pitching to help you do it!"

"What is our next move?"

"Watch every move McCuster makes. I could be wrong, you know. We'll let him lead us as far

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as he can. We'll jump him only if we must."

"I'm with you," Moffitt said.

He turned and faded back into the rainy darkness. Troy pressed back against the side of the truck to keep out of as much of the rain as possible. The car swayed as the train struggled on through the night.

For the next half hour the Rat Patrol leader stared into the blackness and considered their position. He realized full well how dangerous it was and that the slightest mistake would destroy them all.

It was not their personal danger that worried him most. Risk and odds were part of their job. They accepted them without question. What worried him was the success of the mission. Here was a chance to save a lot of Allied lives and perhaps aid in shortening the war. All their raids had been important—strikes at vital enemy concentrations. But in none of them had the stakes been as high as they were now.

A sudden lurch of the car broke Troy's thoughts. He sprang up, instantly alert. The train had stopped. He could hear voices in the dark.

Troy went back to awaken the sleeping men hidden inside the truck and alert them to the danger. Then, gripping his .45 automatic, the Rat Patrol leader slipped off the flatcar. He slid under the train, where he could come out for a surprise attack if any of the Germans he could hear in the dark got the jump on the rest of the Rat Patrol.

He hoped at first that the approaching men would pass on by. They stopped directly opposite Troy. One of them lighted a shielded flashlight, running the narrow beam quickly over the flatcar.

The Nazi soldier said something in German to his companion. Then the two men walked off. Troy eased his automatic back into its holster. He crawled from under the car so he would not be cut in half if the train started suddenly.

Moffitt slipped out of the darkness to join Troy.

"Sam," he said in a low whisper, "I caught what they said. They stopped to pick up a damaged patrol car. They are going to load it on just back of the truck we're holed up in. What do you think we should do?"

"Stay put," Troy said. "It will be morning in

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another half hour or so. The daylight will put us in a tight squeeze, but we're better off than we'd be if we left the train."

"That's right," Moffitt agreed. "We'd be afoot and we'd still face the problem of getting into Tunis."

"Do you still have that bundle of Arab bur-nooses for us to slip on when we have to?"

"Hitchcock is carrying them."

"Better tell everybody to get into them," Troy said. "We may have to make a run for it. They won't chase us as far if they think we're Arabs."

"If we're captured in uniform, we'll be sent to a prisoner-of-war camp," Moffitt said. "If we're taken in Arab costume, we'll be shot as spies."

"So—don't get caught," Troy said.

They stopped talking as a squad of German soldiers marched up. Under direction of a harsh-voiced officer, they placed heavy planks against the side of the flatcar. Then a bomb-damaged patrol car was brought and shoved up the incline.

When the Volkswagen was loaded the soldiers marched away. Moffitt and Troy came out of their hiding places under the train.

"Did you catch what they said, Jack?" Troy asked.

"Yes. It looks bad, Sam," the Englishman said.

"I can guess," Troy replied. "They're not going to make the run into Tunis?"

"You got it," Moffitt said. "There's been a dawn reconnaissance flight by our P-38's every morning for the last week. They must have done a lot of damage, because the Jerry lieutenant told the sergeant the train would not run after daybreak."

"They're not going to sit here, are they?" Troy asked.

Moffitt shook his head. "This place is too exposed in the daylight. I gathered from the talk that the train will pull up about a mile into the hills. There's a short tunnel there. The engine will go in the tunnel for protection. The rest of the train will be covered with camouflage nets."

Troy whistled softly. "We'll be in a spot, Jack."

"We'd better get everyone off now, Sam. There's quite a bit of cactus and brush growing in these hills. We'll have a better chance to hide there than on the train. They'd find us for sure."

"You're right," Troy said. "As soon as they bed

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down for the day, there will be a troop muster. They're going to find two guards missing. There's bound to be a search for them."

"We are in a hot spot, Sam," the Englishman said.

The American nodded. "I have no doubt that our boys can take care of themselves, but I'm worried about those two officers, McCuster and Cane."

"McCuster is expendable as far as I am concerned," Moffitt retorted. "Cane we must have. He is the only one who can make contact with the spy in Tunis."

"That's right," Troy replied. "We must protect him at all costs."

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll ride the train on to the final stopping place. Then we leave the tracks and spread out in the bush," Troy said. "We take care of ourselves as best we can—each man looking out for himself, except you."

"Me?"

"You keep close to McCuster. Watch every movement he makes. I'd do it myself, but you

know how he and I get along. He wouldn't put up with me."

"I understand," Moffitt replied. "Major McCuster has just got himself an extra shadow. Can I shoot the so-and-so if I catch him in any treachery?"

"Don't rush anything," Troy cautioned. "We must be sure."

"But once I'm sure?"

"Do whatever you think is necessary," Troy replied quietly.

When the train started again the two men swung aboard. They alerted the others to the situation.

The train went only a short distance. It stopped again in a narrow defile, with the engine protected by a small tunnel. The repairable tanks, trucks, and cars on the rest of the train were partially screened by high cliffs. These would make it extremely hazardous for American P-38's to come low enough to strafe the train with .50-caliber machine-gun fire.

The Rat Patrol and the two officers moved back into the darkness. The lost guards were not readily

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detected by the train commander. There was considerable bustle as the crew and remaining guards were rapidly deployed to set up light machine-gun positions on the two cliffs overlooking the trains.

Moffitt nudged Troy. "See what they're doing?" he whispered. "They are not putting camouflage nets over the cars. They are being left uncovered to decoy our planes in closer."

"Yeah," Troy said. "They can only attack from down the tracks. Then the gun positions on the cliffs can knock them right out of the sky."

"Should we do something about it?"

Troy hesitated. "We can't jeopardize our main mission regardless of how much good we could do here," he said regretfully. "But if we get a chance, we'll do all we can to help the fly-boys. In the meantime we had better split our group. You take Hitch and McCuster. I'll keep Tully and Cane with me."

They made quick plans, determined signals, and arranged a rendezvous point. Then, after a final word, each man shouldered his backpack, took his gun, and moved off into the darkness.

The rain had started to slacken. At this extremely dangerous point, this was a disadvantage to the patrol. They badly needed its cover.

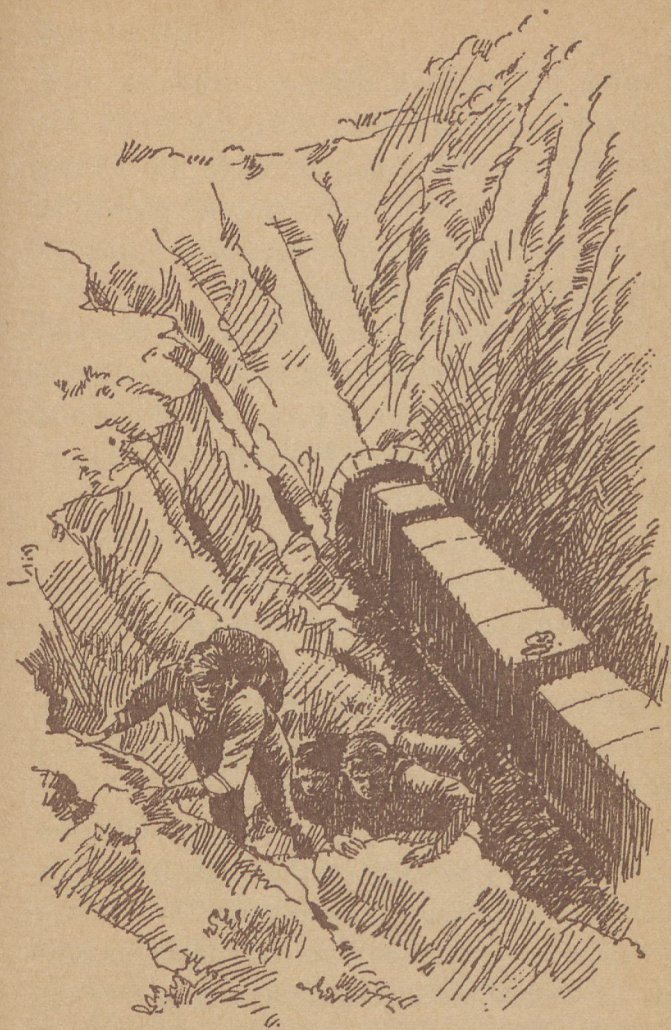
They went off in opposite directions, moving into positions where they could execute the plan agreed on by the two Rat Patrol sergeants.

As he climbed the left slope with Tully and Major Cane, Sam Troy considered the plan. It was extremely risky, but he thought it had a good chance of working.

As best he could tell, there were not more than twenty men in the train crew and its guard detachment. There were some wounded men in the hospital car at the rear of the train, but he thought he could discount them.

Hitchcock was carrying Arab burnouses for each member of the Rat Patrol and the two officers. They were intended for disguises in Tunis, but Troy thought they could don them now and pull an "Arab raid" on the train. Each of them also carried three hand grenades and fifty extra rounds of ammunition for their .45 automatics.

With this armament and the advantage of



surprise, he felt they could handle the train crew and its guard complement. Then they could take the train into Tunis the next night. By putting on the uniforms of the crew and the guards, he thought they could escape detection long enough to get themselves lost in Tunis.

The only unknown factor in his plan was McCuster. He was certain from the circumstantial evidence that the man was a spy, but still he could not be sure. In any event, McCuster was a handicap that could cause trouble.

It was impossible to attack at once. He did not know for sure the exact location of the German defense positions. These he expected to find when daylight came. Then, if the rain kept up to provide a partial cover, he thought they could attack with grenades fast enough to knock out all twenty men.

When they finally got to a secure spot in a cluster of boulders partway up the slope, Troy gave Tully orders to start reconnoitering.

"Find out where that train commander is placing his defense positions and locate a spot we can use to toss a grenade, but don't do anything now.

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We've got to split up and hit them all at once."

"I get you," Tully said happily. The Kentuckian was the worrying type when nothing was happening, but once things started to move and he foresaw action, his spirits bubbled.

Across the tracks, Moffitt, Mark Hitchcock, and Major McCuster were climbing into a similar position. Jack had been surprised when the major did not object to being separated from Major Cane. As soon as they were settled in their hiding places, he found out why. McCuster wanted to sound him out in private.

Pulling Moffitt away from Hitchcock, McCuster asked abruptly, "What do you think of Sergeant Troy?"

There was an odd note in his voice that stirred the Englishman's uneasiness.

"Well, Sam likes to have his own way," he said guardedly.

"He may not have his way much longer," the major said positively. "It is within my authority to take action against him. He directly disobeyed my orders. I told him to go in the other direction. He tricked me with that broken compass. I intend

to do something about it!"

"I guess you could report him to Colonel Brize when we get back," Jack said.

"I'm not waiting," McCuster said softly, but his tone was savage. "This man has put us all in a very dangerous position with his stubbornness. I had a perfect plan to get us into Tunis. He ruined it. I'm not going to trust our vital mission to his incompetency any longer."

"Sir?" Moffitt said.

"Yes, I intend to rip his stripes off myself! I'll make him a buck private like the others. Then he'll take orders, or I'll shoot him down in his tracks. I want you, as the ranking enlisted man, to take over in his place."

"I'll do what I can," Moffitt said quietly.

"Good! I'm going to do what I can, too—to get us out of this mess your precious Sergeant Troy got us into," McCuster said savagely.

"Can I help, sir?" Moffitt asked.

"No, stay here," McCuster replied. "There is too much danger if we both go. You know I was with the French underground here and in Algeria. I thought I recognized the engineer as the

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crew went past us when they were loading the car. I want to make sure. If I am right, we can depend upon his help. He is a secret member of the Free French movement."

"You're taking a big risk, sir," Moffitt said.

"I know it," McCuster agreed, "but the stakes are high. Something has to be done. Wait for me here. I shouldn't be long. I've got to make my contact and get back before daylight."

"I'll try to get some sleep," Moffitt said.

He leaned back and waited for McCuster to slip away. Then he got up and removed his backpack. Carrying only his .45, Moffitt stealthily followed the suspected spy.

8 | *The Battle*

McCUSTER WOUND his way down the slope with Moffitt trailing at a distance. The Englishman had always dismissed both majors as typical headquarters staff types with no combat experience. But he was changing his mind fast.

McCuster was behaving like an experienced combat man. The officer was making his way down the hill silently and carefully, taking advantage of every bit of natural cover to hide his approach from the Jerries.

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"This bloke is no amateur," Moffitt told himself. "In fact, he's *too* good."

McCuster headed directly for one of the defense positions. The sky was starting to gray with approaching morning. Moffitt, on higher ground, could dimly see McCuster getting near the gun nest.

There were three soldiers in it, huddled about a light machine gun set up to meet any Allied air threat during the day.

Moffitt watched McCuster with grudging admiration at the expert way the major worked his way in close to the soldiers without alerting them. He was helped by their carelessness. They were well inside their own lines and expected no opposition except from British and American planes.

The first indication they had of danger was when McCuster suddenly confronted them with drawn gun.

"Do not move!" he snapped in German. "I am your friend!"

Moffitt had moved in close enough to hear the words. Although they had suspected the major of being a spy, it still came as a shock.

Almost trembling in his rage, the Englishman drew a grenade from his pocket. It would betray their presence to the enemy. However, if he let McCuster live, the effect would be the same.

Jack gripped the grenade, but hesitated to throw it as he listened to what McCuster said next.

"Don't move!" the spy said harshly to the three Jerries. "I am not going to harm you if you keep quiet. I just want to get a message to your commander. I will permit just one of you to go to him."

The three soldiers did not reply. They warily eyed the gun in McCuster's hand. The spy indicated one of the men by pointing the gun's muzzle in his direction.

"You," he said. "You are detailed. Tell your commander that I am here and that I can be positively identified for what I am by radioing Tiger Test Task Force headquarters in Tunis. Tell him to contact Capt. Hans Dietrich and give him this code from me: 'L-Three.' Dietrich will then reply with another secret code which your commander can use to assure him that I am not an impostor."

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The corporal in charge of the gun pit looked warily at the major.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"No," McCuster said impatiently. "The Rat Patrol is out there."

"Rat Patrol!" the soldier repeated in alarm.

"Take it easy," McCuster snapped. "They are not going to harm you. I'll see to that. At the same time it is imperative—*imperative*, you understand—that nothing happens to them."

"But—" the soldier began, bewildered that such a dangerous enemy should not be attacked.

"*Dummkopf!*" McCuster snarled. "It is not for you to reason. Your duty is to carry out orders! Go at once and alert your commander. I will wait for him here."

He surprised the soldiers by holstering his gun, leaving himself at their mercy. The corporal looked at McCuster uncertainly. Then he nodded to the private McCuster had designated to get the train commander.

From his vantage point looking down at them, Jack Moffitt eased the hand grenade back in his pocket. McCuster's statement that he did not want

the Rat Patrol harmed changed things. Jack decided he could wait a little longer before pressing the fight. It might help to know exactly what the spy intended to do.

The train commander came quickly, accompanied by two other soldiers carrying rifles. He was a captain. His face was shadowed by a high-peaked hat from which water dripped. He looked suspiciously at McCuster.

"Yes?" he asked curtly. "Who are you?"

The two men with him kept their rifles on McCuster.

"What I say is of no importance, Captain," McCuster said coldly. "The important thing is my identification from Tunis. Did you radio for it?"

"I have," the train commander replied. "They are locating Captain Dietrich. We should get an immediate reply."

"Shall we go to your headquarters?" McCuster suggested.

"I hardly think it wise for you to move until you are positively identified," the train commander replied. "Private Heinrich here has a walkie-talkie tuned to our command post. If a

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message comes from Captain Dietrich, it will be relayed to me here. You will excuse my caution, but if you are who you claim to be, you will understand."

"Of course, *Kapitan*," McCuster replied. "And you may rest assured that it will be noted in my report."

"*Herr Kapitan*," the soldier with the portable radio interrupted. "We have the connection with Captain Dietrich."

The train commander took the walkie-talkie. "This is Captain Muller," he said and then repeated his secret call letters to identify himself positively.

From his wet hiding place, Moffitt repeated the letters in his mind. They might come in handy later.

As soon as there was positive identification between the two officers, Dietrich's voice said, "Let me talk to L-Three. This is extremely important, Muller."

Captain Muller passed the radio to McCuster, but bent his head in order to hear the conversation himself.

"L-Three," McCuster said.

"How is the weather?" Dietrich asked.

"I'll be glad to see the spring," McCuster replied, passing the radio back to Muller.

"Muller?" Dietrich inquired. "The subject has given the proper reply. He is tentatively identified. You may follow any orders he gives—*after you check them with me by radio*. This will be the policy until I can personally check him myself. Treat him with respect, however. He is an extremely important member of our Intelligence system."

"What is his rank in our forces?" Muller asked.

"Even I do not know that," Dietrich said. "Let me talk with him again."

McCuster had been listening to this exchange with an amused smile on his face. He took the radio from Muller.

"You have additional information about the American reaction to our Tiger tank test?" Dietrich asked.

"More important material than that, *Herr Kapitan*," McCuster said quickly. "The American high command is extremely suspicious of the leak

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in their last assault plans. They haven't detected me yet, but I fear they are coming close. I thought it wise to leave before they did. This Rat Patrol mission played right into my hands and gave me a logical excuse to get away—and at the same time strike a powerful blow for the Fatherland. *Heil, Hitler!*”

Moffitt noted that Dietrich did not return the “*Heil, Hitler!*” of McCuster’s. This did not surprise him. Most of the Wehrmacht officers in North Africa detested the Nazi madman. They felt he was destroying them by sending matériel to the Russian front that was urgently needed to stop the Allied push in North Africa.

“What are you doing, then?” Dietrich asked, a worried note in his voice. “Especially, what do you mean about ‘this Rat Patrol mission?’ I know the Rat Patrol. They are more dangerous than an entire armored division.”

“I know that,” McCuster replied. “Here is the scheme. That infernal Allied spy in Tunis has secured a copy of your combat report on the Tiger tank and—”

“Impossible!” Dietrich cried.

"It is true! He passed word that the report is too important to send through his regular communications channels. The Rat Patrol is supposed to take in a Major Cane, who is the only person the spy will deliver the report to. I got myself assigned to the project by playing on my knowledge of Tunis. I bluffed Cane into thinking I was in charge of the mission, but I was unsuccessful in bluffing Sergeant Troy. He's smart—and resourceful. I think he suspects me."

"Sergeant Troy is a very dangerous man," Dietrich said. "I know from personal experience. Three nights ago he raided our test force field camp. How the Rat Patrol got in and out alive is something truly remarkable."

"I know," McCuster said. "That is why I risked arousing suspicion by trying to sidetrack him from this mission. He's an excellent soldier."

"What do you intend to do?" Dietrich asked.

"I want you to arrange safe conduct for us into Tunis. The Rat Patrol and Major Cane will lead us to this spy. Then we close a Rat trap on all of them."

"Good!" Dietrich said. "The report could not

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have been stolen by anyone except a member of the general staff. It seems impossible that one of them could be an Allied spy."

"Remember that I was on the general staff of the enemy myself," McCuster pointed out.

"This is too important to trust to radio contact. It is only fifteen miles to where you are. I'll come and talk to you personally—and verify your identity. Wait for me there."

"I can't wait too long," McCuster warned. "Moffitt thinks I'm making contact with the Free French underground. He's not suspicious like Troy. He's easy to fool, but I can't overdo it."

"I'll come as fast as I can," Dietrich promised.

From his hiding place, Jack Moffitt grimaced and then grinned bleakly. "So I'm easy to fool, huh?" he said softly. "Well, we'll see who is the biggest fool in the end, Mr. L-Three!"

With the broadening daylight, Jack was afraid to linger any longer in the vicinity of the gun pit. He moved back up the slope to join Mark Hitchcock. He filled in his companion on the latest developments. Then he made a wide circle to get beyond the sight of anyone in the camp and

crossed the tracks. It was a slow, dangerous climb up to where Troy was hidden. As he climbed he saw a Volkswagen patrol car zooming furiously down the curving road that flanked the tracks.

"Dietrich!" Moffitt thought. "He didn't lose any time getting here."

He wished that he could listen in on the tank expert's conversation with the spy, but informing Troy of the new developments was more important now.

Major Cane and Tully Pettigrew were together farther up the hill. Troy was taking his turn standing outpost guard.

After Moffitt finished his brief report, Troy said, "Don't let Major Cane know of this yet. In the meantime we'll wait and see what develops. At the moment I'm for letting Dietrich and McCuster carry us into Tunis. It'll solve our problems of getting past the city's perimeter guards."

"But it won't solve our problem of getting away from them once we get inside the city," Jack pointed out. "You know how good Dietrich is, and I've just seen an entirely different McCuster in action. He knows what he's doing also. They

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will have us so tightly boxed in that I can almost hear the firing squad peppering us right now!"

"I don't know what else we can do, Jack," Troy said seriously. "You know our original plan was to try to knock out the train crew when it got dark and drive the engine into Tunis ourselves. McCuster's contact with the Jerries knocks that in the head. They'll be watching for us."

"I know," Moffitt replied. "That wild scheme hung entirely on surprise. We can't surprise them now."

"Neither can Dietrich and McCuster surprise us," Troy said. "I sure miss our jeeps. I know now why the old-time cowboy loved his horse."

"It sure cuts down our style," Moffitt said. "What are we going to do?"

"We'll go along with McCuster and Dietrich," Troy said, "and trust to the Rat Patrol's luck to see us through."

"What you call 'Rat Patrol luck' is really running harder, ducking faster, and—"

"You had better duck now!" Troy broke in.

The Englishman flattened out among the rocks without waiting to see what the Rat Patrol leader

was warning him about. When Sam Troy spoke in that tone Moffitt knew it was time to take action fast.

Then he heard the roar. An American P-38 had come in from downwind, skipping low over the hills and turning directly down the track. By the time Moffitt turned and saw it, the machine guns in the nose were already blasting at the train.

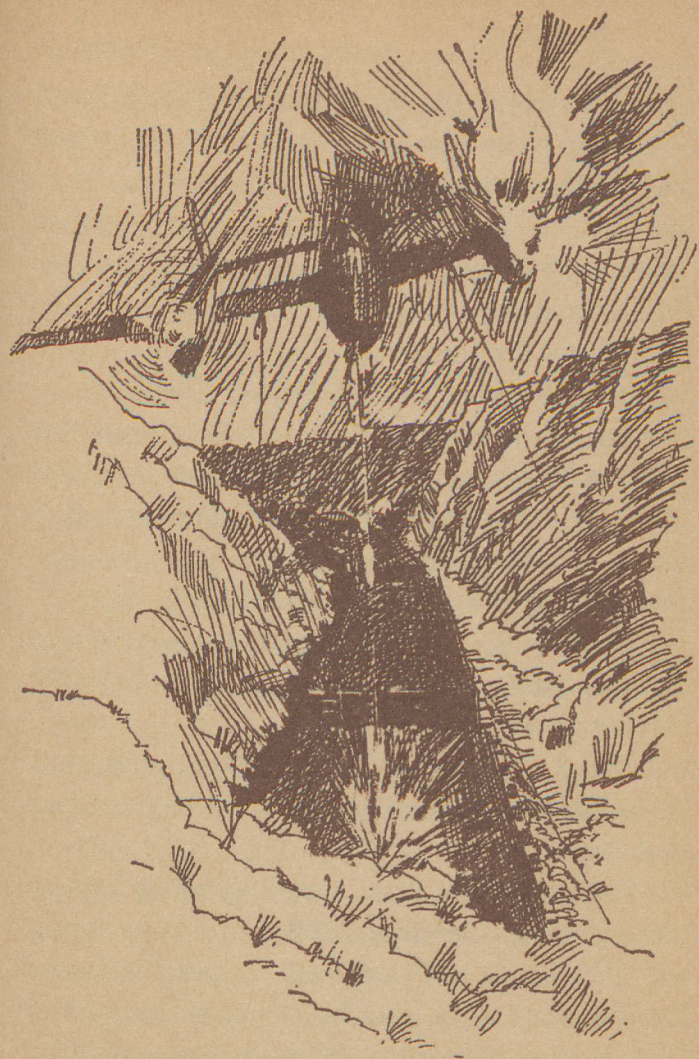
The German machine guns opened up from the tops of the hills. Their fire was almost level with the oncoming plane. Tracers streaked red in a deadly arch.

Suddenly there was an explosion in the left engine. The cockpit canopy was blasted next. The plane swerved. The men on the hill could glimpse the pilot fighting the stiffening controls. It was obvious that he couldn't pull up.

Instead he pushed the controls forward and aimed the nose of his plane straight for one of the machine-gun pits.

Knowing he would not survive anyway, the heroic pilot was trying to take some Germans with him.

Troy and Moffitt saw the soldiers abandon their



guns and run as the plane hurtled toward them. They had waited too long. The nose of the fighter slammed into the ground. A sheet of flame shot up, completely engulfing the twin booms of the plane's tail and spreading out to destroy the two fleeing soldiers.

Major Cane came crawling hurriedly down toward them, but ducked behind a rock when another P-38 zoomed down. Bullets from the plane's .50-caliber machine guns bounced off the rocks as it went past. A steel slug came so close it drew blood from Sam Troy's ear. Another knocked part of the heel off Moffitt's shoe.

"It looks like our side is going to do what the Jerries couldn't—wipe out the Rat Patrol!" Moffitt gasped.

The plane sideslipped and plunged into the hill as crossfire from the German machine guns tore it to pieces.

Troy looked up. Four more Lightning fighters were circling. He turned back to his companions.

"This is it, Jack!" he cried. "While the Jerries are watching the sky, we'll hit them with a ground attack. If we're lucky we can wipe them out!"

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"Talk about it later!" Jack snapped. "Let's get moving!"

"Major Cane," Troy said, turning to the officer. "Could you get across the tracks and locate Mark Hitchcock? Tell him what we're going to do. His job is to knock out the machine-gun nest atop his hill."

"We'll get it!" Cane said positively.

"Hold it, Major," Troy said. "I think it would be better if you stayed out of the actual fighting. You are too important. If anything happened to you we could never contact the spy."

"I guess you're right," Cane said reluctantly. "I won't take any chances."

"Good!" Troy snapped. "Jack, there's a gun emplacement at the rear of the train."

"There won't be for long!" the Englishman said as he started making his way down the slope.

Cane followed him for a short distance and then took a different route. Troy climbed up the hill to where he had left Tully Pettigrew. He hastily told the Kentuckian what they intended to do.

"Get that nest on top of the hill," Troy ordered. "I'm going down after the machine-gun crew in

the tunnel's mouth. Give me a hand as soon as you can."

They separated, each hurrying off into the drizzle. Troy worked his way down the slope, following an eroded ravine that gave him cover all the way to the tracks.

Peering out through some screening brush, he saw seven German soldiers spread out along the edge of the flatcars. Each one carried a tommy gun.

They were too widely dispersed for a hand grenade to knock out more than one. Nor could he expect to kill more than one or two with his .45 before they cut him down.

On the hill there was a blast as Tully's hand grenade destroyed the machine-gun pit. On the opposite side of the track a fusillade of shots rang out as Mark Hitchcock went into action. A machine gun started to chatter from Jack Moffitt's sector.

Troy almost groaned aloud in his frantic frustration. The battle was increasing in fury, and he was cut out of the fighting.

Troy rose in a half-stoop. He hoped to gain

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cover behind a set of iron train wheels and surprise the enemy.

But his hopes were cut short by a burst of machine-gun fire that ripped past his head. He flattened out again, momentarily protected by a slight depression in the ground.

On the opposite side of the train a German non-commissioned officer shouted a command. Three soldiers started advancing on Troy's position from different directions.

There was no way to retreat. Troy gripped his automatic grimly and waited for whatever would happen.

9 | *The Tunis Trap*

FROM THE TOP of the hill Tully Pettigrew dodged falling debris from the machine-gun pit he had destroyed with his grenade.

He grinned with satisfaction as he saw another explosion on the hill across from him. He looked around, trying to spot the rest of the Rat Patrol. He caught a glimpse of Jack Moffitt diving for a hole, with German machine-gun bullets kicking at his heels. Then as he turned he saw Sam Troy trapped by the three advancing Germans.

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Tully's heart leaped. To his battle-trained eye, the Rat Patrol leader was trapped without a chance of escape.

Pettigrew quickly brought his gun up, but dropped his arm again. It was too far away for a good shot. Instead he cupped his hands around his mouth and screamed at the top of his voice.

The startled Germans stopped and looked up. It was a fatal mistake. Sam Troy came out of his hole with his gun blazing. He shot three times and three men fell.

Across the track, the other four dived for cover. They started to shoot wildly. Troy ducked behind the train wheel. Tully came racing down the slope, firing as he came. The range was too far for accurate shooting either by himself or the enemy, but he wanted to keep their attention off Sam Troy.

Troy pulled the pin on a grenade and hurled it toward a group of Germans who had made the mistake of huddling together instead of spreading out. The explosion knocked out the opposition.

Tully came running up. "Where are the others?" he gasped, winded from his run.

"Don't worry about them!" Troy snapped. "Come on!"

He dived under the train as an unseen gunner cut loose at them. Steel-jacketed bullets struck the rails, glancing off with shrill whines.

Tully raised up, seeking the German. A bullet struck the wheel axle near his head. It ricocheted off at an angle and cut across Tully's temple.

The Kentuckian sagged. Troy called anxiously, "Tully?"

"I'm okay!" Pettigrew said thickly. "Just scratched."

A thin line of blood coursed down his cheek, but he kept going. He crawled under the wheels and came up between the cars. The Jerry gunner, pinned down now by Troy's return fire, did not see Pettigrew until it was too late. He tried to swing his gun around, but the Kentuckian beat him to the shot.

Behind them the shooting stopped on the opposite slope. Troy could not see what was happening there, but had full faith that his partners were holding up their end of the battle.

"I think that gun crew by the tunnel entrance

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is the only opposition we have left," he said to Tully. "Are you in shape to back me up?"

Tully touched the cut on his temple. It hurt unmercifully. His head clanged like an off-beat bell, but he struggled to hide it.

"I've cut myself worse shaving," he said. "Come on! Let's fight now and talk tomorrow."

"Okay," Troy replied. "But we're going to need some help on this one."

He put two fingers in his mouth and gave a shrill whistle.

Moffitt shrilled an answer to the signal. Hitchcock also replied from a position about two hundred yards to the left of Moffitt.

"Okay, Tully," Troy said to his companion. "They understand what we are trying to do. We can depend on them to back us up. Now, I want you—"

"Look out, Troy!" Tully yelled.

Sam Troy whirled, seeking the danger. It was not on the ground, but in the air. Two American P-38 Lightnings were streaking down out of the sodden sky for another attack on the train. Two others were maneuvering to follow them.

The two Americans threw themselves on the ground in a desperate attempt to escape the hail of bullets spitting from the noses of the oncoming planes.

They raised up gingerly as the P-38's swept over, their camouflaged bottoms quickly blending into the gray sky. As Troy got to his feet there was a tremendous roar. The ground shook mightily, throwing him off his feet. Flame and smoke belched from the tunnel opening.

As he fell Troy realized what had happened. While the P-38's had been drawing attention by attacking from their side of the tunnel, another plane that none of them had seen had come in from the opposite side of the hill to skip a bomb into the tunnel.

The explosion caused a landslide above the tunnel. Dirt and rock came roaring down. The men in the German machine-gun pit started to run. The avalanche engulfed them.

"We lost that round!" It was Jack Moffitt who spoke, gasping for breath as he came running up. "This train will never move again."

"We haven't lost yet!" Troy snapped. "There's

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still a chance we can get into Tunis—if Dietrich doesn't outrun us! Get Hitch and Major Cane.”

Calling to Tully Pettigrew to follow him, the Rat Patrol leader ran in a low crouch along the side of the train. From somewhere to their left a rifle cracked. Troy didn't bother to look in that direction to see if he was the target. He knew that success or failure of their mission now hung on split seconds.

He and Pettigrew ran through an eddying current of smoke and clambered over some of the rocks thrown down by the exploding engine in the tunnel.

On the other side he paused just long enough to hurriedly give Pettigrew orders.

“Dietrich came in a Volkswagen patrol car, evidently driving himself,” Troy said. “We've got to get to that car before he does or we're stranded. Watch out, however. He has McCuster helping him now. You cut to the right and keep me covered.”

The Rat Patrol leader gave a hasty look around. He saw Moffitt and Hitchcock running toward them. Both men were in the open, but no shots

were being fired at them. Major Cane was following behind.

Waving his arm in a circling movement, Troy ran ahead. The Tunis road paralleled the tracks most of the way, but detoured at this location because of the tunnel. Troy headed up the pile of earth left by the slide.

As he cleared the top a machine gun started to chatter. Rocks splattered around him as the bullets ripped into the earth. Troy ducked back over the crest. He slipped a few feet in the soft earth before he could stop himself.

Tully rushed up to join him. "I'll draw their fire to me," he said quickly. "Then you can make it over the top."

"Okay," Troy said. "But watch yourself. It's Dietrich, and McCuster is with him. They're heading for Dietrich's patrol car. We've got to stop them!"

"I get you," Tully said.

He moved quickly to the right as Troy climbed back to the crest of the hill. Then Pettigrew suddenly exposed himself, jumping up to fire a quick shot at the two men racing to get to Dietrich's car.

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He could see it parked less than two hundred feet in front of them. He had a sinking feeling. The range was too far for the .45's. They couldn't move in closer because there was little cover and they were outgunned by the German tommy gun McCuster was carrying.

McCuster saw Tully and whirled to fire a quick burst in his direction. Troy looked back to see where Moffitt and Hitchcock were. He saw Major Cane cut off by four German soldiers who had rallied and grouped to attack the Americans. Moffitt and Hitch turned back to help the officer.

Troy turned and plunged over the hill, running in a crouch to present as small a target as possible. McCuster squeezed off a burst of fire at him. Troy hit the ground, sliding in behind the protection of a cactus cluster.

As Troy clawed the dirt Tully jumped up from the other side. He dived in behind a pile of rocks. Troy raised up to draw another burst from McCuster's gun.

McCuster didn't seem to realize what they were doing, but the more experienced Dietrich did. He yelled at the spy, telling him that the Americans

were tricking him into expending his ammunition before they rushed the two of them.

McCuster, in his anxiety, either didn't hear Captain Dietrich's yell or chose to ignore it. When both Americans suddenly raised up from their protection, he started shooting. He swung the gun muzzle in an arc, throwing a wild spray of lead.

The gun cut out as he exhausted the canister of ammunition. He turned and ran after Dietrich, realizing now how the two Rat Patrollers had tricked him by presenting targets that he wasn't likely to hit.

Troy and Tully sprang to their feet, charging down the slope toward the fleeing Germans.

Dietrich reached the patrol car with McCuster right behind him. The engine roared as the German panzer chief threw it in gear and made a tight turn.

McCuster grabbed an extra canister of ammunition and was frantically trying to get it in the gun.

To get to the main Tunis road Dietrich had to come fifty feet directly toward the charging Rat Patrol. Tully dropped to the ground to steady

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himself and aimed directly at the driver.

Dietrich anticipated him. The German ducked low and Tully's bullet whammed against the patrol car's steel armor plate.

"The grenade!" Troy yelled to Tully. "If you have one left, throw it!"

He had hoped it would not be necessary to destroy the car. They needed it desperately themselves. But they had no choice now. If Dietrich and McCuster got away, they would throw an alert around Tunis that the Rat Patrol could never penetrate.

Tully stood up. He hurled the grenade as Dietrich pulled the patrol car onto the road.

The German saw it coming. Pettigrew aimed in front of the Volkswagen, expecting the car's speed to bring it into position for a direct hit. Dietrich threw on his brakes and turned sharply, sliding in the mud. The grenade exploded in the middle of the macadam surface, but the flying shrapnel bounced harmlessly off the patrol car's armor plate.

Dietrich gunned the engine, trying to get out of the mud and back on the road. The delay gave

Troy time to get into range for a shot of his own. McCuster, his tommy-gun ammunition replenished now, fired a burst at the oncoming Rat Patrol leader. The jerk of the car as Dietrich gunned it spoiled the spy's aim. The deadly blast went over Troy's head.

Troy ignored the two men and aimed at the Volkswagen's tires. Knowing this was his last chance, he emptied his automatic. There were only three bullets left.

The last one hit the left rear tire. The exploding air kicked the car off balance. In spite of Dietrich's frantic efforts, it went off the road. The front wheels hit the ditch and the car turned over. The two men were thrown out.

The soft mud kept them from being hurt. Troy saw McCuster raise up. The tommy gun had been knocked from his hand. He scrambled for it. Troy dived for him, swinging his own empty automatic at the spy's head. McCuster caught his arm. The two men slipped and fell in the mud.

Dietrich scrambled up to come to his aid, but went down as Tully hit him from behind with a football tackle.

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Fighting desperately for his life, McCuster rammed his knee into Troy's body. The Rat Patrol leader doubled up in pain, but grimly hung on to McCuster's knee. McCuster clubbed him loose and dived for the tommy gun.

Troy went after him, just a split second too late to prevent the spy from grabbing the gun. Sam caught the barrel, forcing it up as McCuster fired. The spy sagged as the bullets struck him instead of Sam Troy.

The Rat Patrol leader jumped back to avoid being dragged down by McCuster's falling body. He looked around to see how Tully was coming along. He saw the Kentuckian picking himself out of the mud. Dietrich was unconscious.

Sam grabbed the German tommy gun and said hurriedly to Tully, "There's nothing wrong with the Volkswagen except that ruined rear tire. There doesn't seem to be a spare. You remember how we stuffed that tire we lost on our Tebourba raid?"

"Sure do!" Tully replied.

"Then get with it," Troy said. "I'm going to help Jack and Hitch!"

While the leader went to help the others, Pettigrew got the tire tools from the car's tool compartment. He didn't need a jack since the Volkswagen was on its side. He removed the wheel and pried off the tire. There was a sizable hole in the casing and the inner tube was ruined.

By this time Troy was back with Moffitt, Hitchcock, and Major Cane. Cane looked at the spy's body with a stunned expression.

"It just doesn't seem possible that a spy could have gotten himself on the general's staff," he said thickly.

"Is it any more impossible than our spy getting into a similar position in Tunis?" Troy asked.

"I guess not," Cane replied. "What do we do now?"

"Keep going until we win. We've knocked out the train crew. McCuster is dead. Then, with Dietrich in our hands, no one knows the Rat Patrol is headed for Tunis."

Troy moved swiftly. He had Hitchcock gather German uniforms for them. Their own clothing was torn and stuffed into the flat tire. When they heaved the jeep-like vehicle back on its wheels, the

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stuffed tire sagged as the cloth compressed, but it held up enough to keep the rim from hitting the pavement. It rode almost like a half-deflated tire.

"Good enough," Troy said. "The tire will make the car harder to steer, but it should hold up. We're on our way."

They climbed into the vehicle and placed the still unconscious Hans Dietrich in the front, with Troy at the wheel and Tully supporting the German. There was not sufficient room to lay him down in the back. Also it was part of Troy's plan to have Dietrich, who was well known, where he was readily visible.

The plan quickly proved its value. They passed two truck convoys and a company of tanks without being challenged. Then the road cut straight across the Tunisian Plains to the city. The rain was a light drizzle and the outlines of the city were blurred by the mist. The European villas, stair-stepped on the hills, were dim ghosts in the rain. The walls of the ancient city, preserved since the days of knights and swords, loomed up before them. The road led directly to a gate with soldiers

standing guard before a barricade.

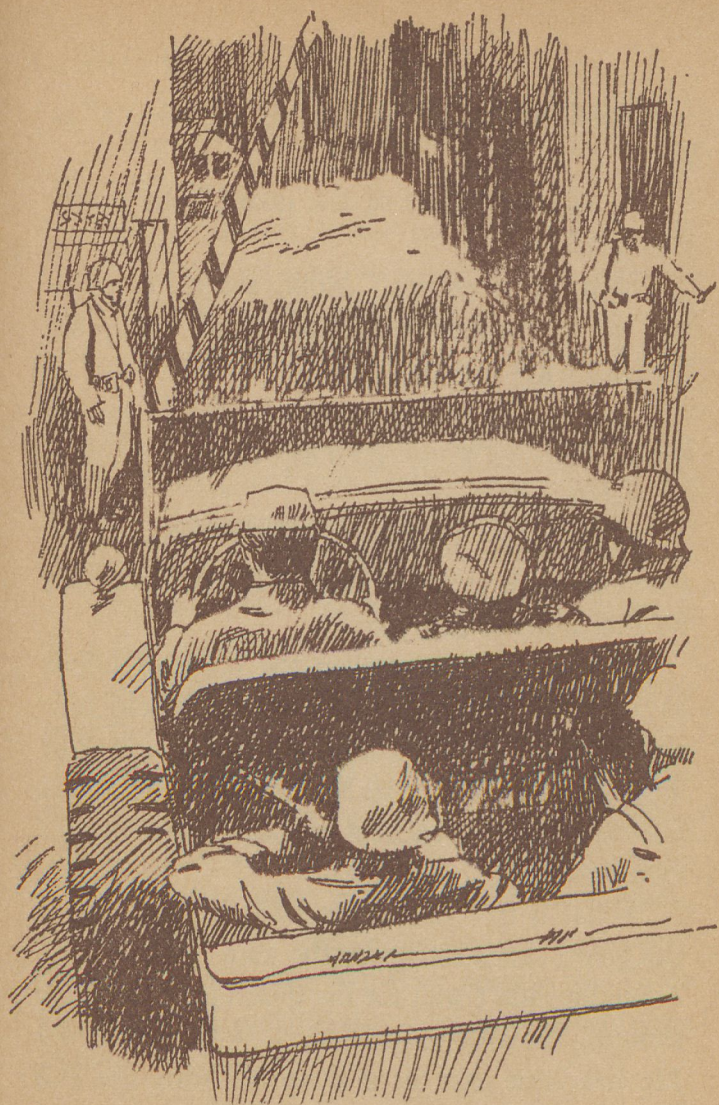
"Okay, Jack," Troy said to Moffitt. "You are the only one who can speak Jerry's language. Whether or not we come out of this alive is strictly up to you."

"We couldn't have picked a more historic spot for a fight," Jack said. "The site of old Carthage, the city that gave Rome so much trouble, is just above here. Hannibal himself walked these plains before his Roman campaign."

Troy slowed down as the gate guards brought up their rifles. The corporal of the guard shouted an order for them to stop. Troy put on the brake. He hunched over the wheel as if too weary to move. In the back Hitchcock gripped the German tommy gun that Tully had given him. In the front, beside Troy, Tully supported the still unconscious body of Capt. Hans Dietrich.

"Your pass, sir," the sentry said, saluting with his rifle.

Moffitt leaned over between Tully and Troy. He lifted Dietrich's head. "Quick!" he said in rapid German. "There is no time to lose. Captain Dietrich of the Tiger test force has been severely



wounded. We must get him to the hospital at once!"

"I'll call the officer of the guard," the sentry said quickly.

"Hurry, *Dummkopf!*" Moffitt snarled in imitation of an impatient German officer. "Captain Dietrich's life is at stake."

The corporal of the guard wheeled to get his officer. Between Tully and Troy, Captain Dietrich moved slightly.

"Don't make a sound, Captain," Troy whispered through clenched teeth. "If you do I have no choice but to kill you!"

Troy leaned over against the German officer so the folds of his rain-sodden jacket would hide the knife he pressed against Dietrich's side. The Tiger test force officer let his taut breath out in an unsteady sigh, but he kept his head down and his eyes closed.

"What is it?" the officer said, coming out of the guard shack set up by the gate.

Moffitt didn't wait for the guard to answer. He shouted, "It is Captain Dietrich of the test force! He has been shot in a skirmish with the Rat

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Patrol. We are bringing him to the hospital."

"Dietrich!" the officer cried. "His project has top priority."

He rushed over to the car to verify the test force officer's identity. When he saw that it was indeed Dietrich, he said quickly, "Here, I will give you a guide to the hospital. Gruber! In the car!"

One of the guards squeezed into the rear with Cane, Moffitt, and Hitchcock. Troy released the brake and jammed down on the accelerator. The Volkswagen leaped forward.

"Straight ahead," the guard said. "The hospital is in the Old City."

Troy followed the main road along a thoroughfare that was more French than Arabic. The street was jammed with traffic, mostly military vehicles. The guard stood up in the back, shouting and waving his rifle to clear them a path.

Shortly they came to the wall of the *medina*, the old Arabic city that furnished the core around which the half-east, half-west section of Tunis had grown. A decorated arched gate was directly in front of them.

"You can't drive through it," the guard said. "That is the *Porte de France*. Turn left. There is a vehicle gate."

Troy tried to turn, but Arabs pulling handcarts of merchandise, bound for the *sugs*, or market-places, in the ancient city, clogged their way. The guard shouted at them wrathfully. The Arabs, hating the Germans who had taken control of their city, pretended not to understand.

The guard jumped down to knock them out of the way with his rifle butt.

"Quick!" Troy whispered back to Major Cane. "Where are we headed?"

"It's in the Old City—a building next to the—" Major Cane began.

"That's enough!" Troy said hastily. "Remember our guest, Captain Dietrich, can hear us. Just in case. . . ."

The guard came back after beating a path for the car. Troy let out the clutch and started to turn slowly around a pushcart that moved out in front of them despite the guard's angry shout.

As Troy turned, the hood of the patrol car pointed at the *medina* wall. In that instant

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Dietrich jerked his foot around. He slammed it down on Troy's foot on the car's accelerator. The vehicle leaped straight for the wall.

Tully grabbed the captain as Troy jammed on the brakes. The guard, realizing instantly that something was wrong, shouted to a passing truck of soldiers.

In his attempt to avoid crashing head on into the wall, Troy hit the brakes too hard for the wet street. He went into a skid. He frantically twisted the wheel to bring the car out of it.

There wasn't sufficient room to maneuver properly. The back armor-plated fender hit against the wall. The car went completely out of control.

10 | *The Spy*

THE CAR HIT the wall again with a numbing shock. For a moment Troy was dazed. Then the stunning realization that their prisoner was escaping hit him.

He looked around. Captain Dietrich was gone. Troy heard his voice booming out something in German.

"He's telling them we're the Rat Patrol!" Moffitt gasped, grabbing Troy's arm. "Come on, Sam! Snap out of it! We're not the Rat Patrol

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any longer. We're rats in a trap!"

"Not yet!" Troy snapped, his head clearing somewhat.

Across the street, the soldiers from the truck ducked and flattened on the pavement when Hitchcock opened up with a blast from the tommy gun.

"Come on!" Troy shouted. "Into the *medina*!"

With Hitchcock slowing the enemy with short bursts from the tommy gun, the five men ran for the Old City gate.

The old Moslem quarter of Tunis was a maze of crooked, narrow alleys with overhanging balconies. Here were hundreds of *sucs* in which everything imaginable was sold.

The five fugitives wove in and out of the bazaars and turned up first one street and then another to confuse their pursuers. Then, when the Jerry soldiers were no longer in sight, Troy led them into a *suc* where clothing was sold.

Major Cane spoke Arabic passably well. Under Troy's suggestion, aided by the persuasive muzzle of Hitchcock's gun, the trembling, wailing proprietor took them into the rear of the store. Here

they quickly changed from their wet German uniforms to Arabian burnouses.

Troy took a gold coin from his wallet. It was part of the standard escape kit carried by all troops going behind enemy lines and was meant for just such a contingency.

The coin represented several times the value of the clothing. When he dropped it in the proprietor's hands the old man's laments turned to weeping joy.

"All these people hate the Germans," Troy said. "Tell him we are Americans, Major. Tell him to put the uniforms where the searchers will find them. When they ask where we went, tell him to say we asked for an address directly opposite from the way we are going. Tell him if he does this we will come back with two more gold coins like the one I just gave him."

Major Cane stumbled through an Arabic translation of Troy's words. The old man's joy was so great he fell on the floor and tried to kiss Major Cane's feet.

"Can we trust him?" Moffitt said.

"He'll get nothing from the Germans, but he

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has a chance to get a small fortune from us," Troy replied. "He'll do it our way as long as he thinks it is to his advantage."

"Don't waste our getaway money too fast," Moffitt cautioned. "As we ran through the gate I heard Dietrich yell to one of the soldiers to get to the telephone and alert the *medina* guard. There must be a company of Military Police inside the Old City to keep order. They'll be joining the search for us."

"I know," Troy said. "Every gate out of this sector will be closed. Dietrich will have every house, *suq*, and restaurant searched. With a chance to knock out both us and—even more important—a spy inside their general staff, they'll make the search a total effort."

While they spoke Major Cane crouched on the floor with the old *suq* owner and jabbered in the native language. The Arab was drawing lines with his finger in the dust.

Cane got up. "Okay," he said, "I have the directions now. Ready, Sergeant Troy?"

Troy nodded. Moffitt went to the street to look around. He came back. "There's a company of

Jerry soldiers coming this way," he said. "They are searching every *suq*."

"Maybe there is a way out the back," Major Cane suggested.

"They'll expect us to be running," Troy said. "I'm for meeting them head on."

He led the way to the door. Then, jabbering and waving their arms, the five men walked past the searching soldiers. At the end of the street, following Major Cane's directions, they turned at a cross alley. They made two more turns and finally halted at a cafe where the strong odor of boiling mutton overpowered the other smells of the ancient East.

"This is the place I asked the Arab for directions to," the major said. "But I was afraid to trust him. This is not the location we are looking for. But now that I have found this place, I can go the rest of the way myself."

The actual location was five shops down the winding alley. It proved to be a pottery *suq* presided over by a woman who looked old enough to have been around when Tunis was Carthage.

After Major Cane gave her the password, she

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gave him a steady stare. Then, without opening her mouth, she waved her hand toward the rear of the store. They went back where a man as old as the woman was pumping the treadle on a potter's wheel. His crippled fingers were forming the lump of wet clay into a surprisingly graceful water pitcher.

He got up hastily and took them out the back. They went up an alley so narrow they could barely squeeze between the buildings. He took them into a brass and copperware *sug* where a boy was hammering a sheet of copper into a tray.

No words passed between them. Everything was understood. The boy took them to three other locations where they passed secret inspections before they were at last taken to a tiny restaurant. The others were left at a table, with cups of tea so sweet it was almost syrup. Cane was taken alone into the back of the cafe.

Outside they could hear shouts of searching soldiers. From somewhere a loudspeaker blared out a message in Arabic, German, and French. It warned everyone that Allied spies were loose in the *medina*. It promised the most terrible death

to anyone aiding the fugitives.

"How do we stand?" Troy asked in a low voice.

"I've got the tommy gun under this Mother Hubbard garb," Hitchcock said. "Probably a burst or two left in it."

"I've got one grenade," Tully reported.

"I have an automatic with three bullets and a bowie knife," Moffitt said.

"And I think Major Cane has an automatic," Troy said. "Not much to fight our way out with, is it?"

"Here comes the major now," Tully said. "I hope he found the spy."

They could not see their companion's face. Since they had no makeup, their faces would not pass for Arabic on close inspection. They were all careful to keep their heads down.

Major Cane slipped into the seat beside Sam Troy.

"This is terrible," he said in a low whisper. "The spy's house is just down the alley, but he is dead!"

"What happened?" Troy asked, his voice tight.

"I don't know," Cane whispered back. "He was

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lying on the floor of a room which had been fitted up as a secret photographic darkroom to make microfilm copies of documents. The room looked as if it had been hurriedly searched."

"Are you sure it was the spy?" Troy asked.

"He was injured in the face, but he certainly resembled the man I knew," Cane said, his voice shaking. "And he was wearing a curious ring I remembered. I'm sure it was our man. There is no cause for secrecy now. He was actually Col. Malvin Smythe-Lanson of British Counterintelligence, but he had served nine years with the German Army as Maj. Wolfgang Conreid."

"That wraps up our mission," Moffitt said bitterly. "Our first failure. . . . We had better get out of here as fast as we can."

"There's something peculiar about this," Troy said. "If the Germans discovered the spy, they would have arrested him and set a trap for us. Someone else killed this man—and perhaps stole the report we sought."

"Who could it have been?" Cane asked. "Not the Free French underground. We have contact with them. They would have made a report to

us. This man has been dead for at least two days. That was before we left on this mission."

"Then who did it?" Moffitt asked.

"My guess is an Arab group," Troy said. "Probably criminals. There are plenty of them in these North African cities."

"You think they killed the spy and stole the report to sell it to the highest bidder?" Moffitt asked, his face both thoughtful and worried.

"I do," Troy replied.

"How do we get in touch with them to buy it back?" Major Cane asked. "It is worth a fortune! Both to our side and to the enemy."

"If I'm right—and it is only a guess—" Troy said, "they'll contact our side. I don't think there is anything else we can do personally. We'd better chalk this one up as the Rat Patrol's first failure and try to get out alive—if we can."

There was a loud commotion down the street. Troy went to the door to look out. He came back quickly.

"The searchers have found the dead spy," he said quickly. "There's quite a crowd gathering around the place. Come on. We'll lose ourselves in

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the mob and see what we can find out."

The five men, feeling comparatively safe in the Arab burnouses, pushed their way into the jam of people around the house of the spy. German soldiers were yelling and pushing the curious throngs back. The narrow, alley-like streets converged in front of the house into a small plaza dominated by a well in the center. The area was jammed with people.

As they pushed their way close to the house, Captain Dietrich, his head bandaged, came out.

"This is definitely the spy we were searching for," Moffitt heard Dietrich say to another officer who accompanied him. "Notify Counterintelligence. Get the dead man's fingerprints. Once we identify him, we can backtrack his movements and locate his associates."

"What about the Rat Patrol?" the other officer asked.

"We could have killed them when they were in the open at the *Porte de France*," Dietrich said. "But I deliberately ordered the soldiers to fire high. I needed to have them escape and lead us to the spy. Troy was too fast for us. Somehow

they got away from our searchers. However, now that the spy is dead, we don't need the Rat Patrol alive any longer. Pass the order to shoot them on sight. Don't run the risk of trying to take them prisoners."

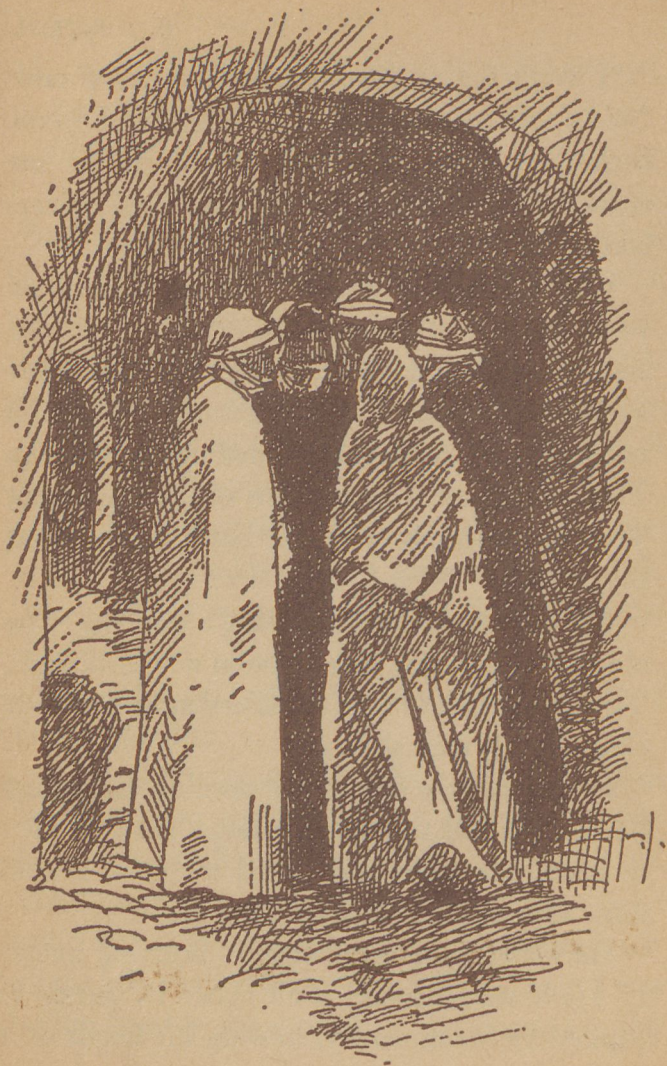
"I'll get the order out at once," the other officer said. "We'll completely seal in the Old City. Nobody will leave it without a pass. Anything or anybody who tries will be shot down."

He turned and yelled at the soldiers to disperse the crowd. They charged into the mob swinging their gun butts. The crowd surged back. The Rat Patrol went with it. They turned down the first alley they came to. They made two more turns before they halted to plan their next move.

"There's little we can do in the daylight," Troy said hurriedly. "We must wait for night. It will be at least another four hours before dark. We must find some place to hole up."

"Let's go back to the clothing *suq*," Moffitt suggested. "You paid the proprietor enough to ensure his loyalty—I hope."

"I have some gold if that is needed to make him even more loyal," Major Cane said.



"I don't know anything better," Troy said. "We'll split up, and each of us will make his way back there alone. That way there will be less chance of all of us being taken. Good luck, everybody!"

Troy was the first one back. The old man bowed when he came in and took the American into the back room, where two teen-age boys sat cross-legged, tailor-fashion, sewing garments. They did not look up. The old man piled up some boxes. Then he indicated by motions of his hands that Troy should climb up on the boxes and push on the ceiling.

The boards gave way, opening a trapdoor. The old man made an upward motion with his hands. Troy hesitated and then decided that he had little choice but to trust the man.

He grabbed the edge of the opening and pulled himself up and through the hole. The old man mounted the boxes and closed the door behind him. Troy was left alone in total darkness.

He waited for several seconds, listening intently. He heard no sound at all. Then he started to explore the room slowly, moving his hands over

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the wall. He found bales of cloth piled around, but nothing more.

"Don't move, Sergeant!"

The voice that came out of the dark spoke in English, with a slight British accent, but it had the arrogant, commanding manner of a Prussian officer.

Troy pressed back against the wall. His right hand pointed his automatic in the direction of the voice. He tensed, ready to spring or shoot if he sensed an opening.

"Don't do anything rash," the voice said. "I am securely barricaded behind some bales of cloth. You can't hit me with your gun. Where are the others?"

"You don't expect me to answer, do you?" Troy replied harshly.

"Then I'll tell *you*," the voice said. "I have been following you ever since you entered the Old City, Sergeant Troy. I was watching when Captain Dietrich deliberately let you escape so he could follow you. I watched every move you made all the way to the Plaza of the Sweet Water. I was within hearing distance when you stopped in the

Street of the Golden Camel to discuss your next move."

"If you had intended to betray us, you would have done so earlier," Troy said. "Who are you?"

"Can't you guess?" the voice said.

11 | *The Big Bang*

ARE YOU THE man we came to find?" Troy asked, his heart beating hard.

"Yes," the English voice replied. "I am Malvin Smythe-Lanson. You will excuse my introducing myself in that manner, but it was necessary. I feared if I tried to approach you, you would shoot first and then inquire as to my identity."

"Who was the dead man back in the house?" Troy asked.

"A German Counterintelligence officer who

finally found me out," the spy said. "I had to take care of him. Fortunately I did so before he could make a report. However, it will only be a matter of time before my whole secret is out. They know now that there is a spy in general headquarters. No one could escape the dragnet they have out for me."

"You left the body to throw off Jerry's Counter-intelligence?" Troy asked.

"Just to give me a little more time," Smythelanson said. "German Intelligence has some very brilliant men. They will soon discover the deception. I couldn't run, however, until I delivered my—material—to you."

"Take it back yourself," Troy said. "You can't stay here any longer. They'll find you. Come back with us."

"I shall try," the officer said. "But I have been wounded. It happened in the fight with the man I left in my place in the house. I may not be able to make it back. Of all your crew, including Major Cane, whom I knew years ago, I think you have the best chance of surviving to get home. I want you to take it."

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A flashlight suddenly cut the darkness. Troy saw a man across the room. He was in a German uniform. His thin face was haggard. He looked ill. He placed a tiny capsule on a bale of cloth stacked in front of him.

"This is microfilm," he said. "It contains a photographic record of Captain Dietrich's report on the Tiger tank. Take it and let nothing stop you from getting it back."

Shortly after, the rest of the patrol and Major Cane arrived one at a time. Cane readily identified the spy.

"As long as Counterintelligence has not identified me," Smythe-Lanson said, "I can still sign passes. I have a Volkswagen patrol car hidden for just such an emergency. We will drive out on my pass. If all goes well, we have it made. If not—we'll see what happens then."

They decided that it was too risky to leave in the daylight. They remained in the clothing loft until dark. Then Colonel Smythe-Lanson led them to his hidden patrol car.

With Troy at the wheel and the colonel still in his German major's uniform, they drove to the

Porte de France. A guard checked the pass which Smythe-Lanson presented, saluted, and passed them through.

However, when they approached the barricade leading out of Tunis proper, they saw that something was wrong. Troy pulled up at the curb of the French-like thoroughfare.

A blackout was in effect, but they could see shielded lights moving about a stopped car. A line of military vehicles was stalled behind it.

"Look's like they're really giving everything a shakedown," Troy said uneasily. "Dietrich must have found out what happened and put out a general alarm."

"No chance of getting out now with a pass," the spy said. "I fear, gentlemen, that we must back-track through the city and try to get out by boat."

"Do you have any contacts at the docks, Colonel?" the major asked.

"None," Smythe-Lanson said. "We must trust to luck."

"What do you say, Sergeant Troy?" Cane asked the Rat Patrol leader.

"Crash the roadblock and fight our way

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through," Troy said. "We've done it before."

"Suicide!" the colonel snapped. "Don't you think so, Major?"

Major Cane gave a short, rueful laugh. "Colonel," he said, "I learned my lesson back in the hills when we were trying to get into Tunis. The best thing is for you and me to retire to our cots!"

"Cots?" the colonel repeated in surprise. "What do you mean, *cots*?"

"What I mean is—to quote a certain West Point cadet—'Carry on, Sergeant!'"

Troy did not wait for the colonel to reply. He turned and whispered urgently to his three men: "We'll take over the first patrol car in the lineup. Tully, take that last grenade we have and clean out the gate. Jack, it's up to you to take this car and block the rest of the traffic. Hitch, there's a machine gun on the back of this vehicle. You know what to do with it. Give Major Cane your tommy gun. Do you have any weapons, Colonel?"

"There's a tommy gun with extra ammunition under the rear seat compartment," the spy said. "But I think you are—"

"Thanks," Troy said crisply. "Dig it out, Hitch.

Give a canister of ammo to Major Cane. You take the rest, Colonel, with the gun."

"We're ready, Sam," Moffitt said.

"Then start moving!" Troy replied, leaping from the Volkswagen.

He went off rapidly into the dark with Tully Pettigrew at his heels. They got as close to the stalled line of traffic as they could. Now they could see the guards making a thorough check of every vehicle before permitting it to pass out of the city.

"Ready, Tully?" Troy said.

"I've *been* ready," the Kentuckian replied quietly.

"Then let her go!"

Tully slipped closer to the arched gate that backed the roadblock. Troy moved closer to the waiting line of cars.

An angry voice suddenly shouted to Troy in German, probably warning him back. Troy stopped, wishing ardently that he had changed from his burnoose back to the German uniform, but there was no helping that now.

He started to move back, but went as slowly

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as he could without drawing a bullet for lagging.

At that moment Tully hurled his grenade. The explosion ripped out the center of the barricade. At its signal, Hitchcock cut loose with the .50-caliber machine gun mounted in the rear of the German patrol car. He raked the line of vehicles.

Moffitt drove in to help Troy as the two officers opened up with their German tommy guns. Troy darted forward and caught the driver of the first vehicle in line with a hard blow that knocked him unconscious. The passenger in the opposite seat jerked an automatic and pointed it in Troy's direction, but Moffitt hit him with a rabbit punch on the back of the neck.

"Jump in!" Troy shouted, climbing into the driver's position.

The rest followed them into the car. The Volkswagen's wheels screamed as Troy kicked the accelerator to the floor. They all ducked as a hail of lead bounced off the back armor plate.

The front wheels hit a piece of broken pavement thrown up by the grenade Tully had hurled earlier. The Volkswagen bounced high in the

air, slid, and almost went over. Troy's face was grim as he whipped the steering wheel to the right. The skid straightened and they roared off into the night with German bullets whipping about them.

Troy drove only a short distance and then turned off the highway. He plowed heavily through mud for half a mile. Then he circled and came back near the highway again.

They could see the slitted blackout lights of pursuing cars zooming down the road at too high a speed for blackout driving.

Tully counted the lights. "Dietrich must have the whole Wehrmacht out after us," he said.

Troy did not answer. He waited until the last car passed. Then he pulled out behind them, following along as part of the convoy. After several miles the procession stopped. The six men in the Volkswagen sat in stiff apprehension, guns held ready to blast their way out if their deception was discovered.

Shortly they saw the front cars turn off the highway to the left. A German sergeant came running back, shouting instructions to the other cars.

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"He says that Dietrich thinks we've turned off on a dry lake to the left," Jack reported. "He doesn't believe we left the road earlier because of the heavy mud."

"That is the good captain's major fault," Troy said. "He always thinks that we will do only the sensible things. But we don't!"

"Sometimes it pays to be crazy!" Tully said with a grin.

"And this was one of those times," Troy said. "Now we will take Captain Dietrich's advice and cut across the salt lake—but behind instead of in front of him."

They followed the pursuing German patrol cars until they turned back in disappointment. Then, dousing his blackout slit light, Troy headed straight across the countryside toward the Allied lines. The front was only thirty miles from Tunis, but in cutting across the land the traveling was slow and hard through the mud and fields and olive groves.

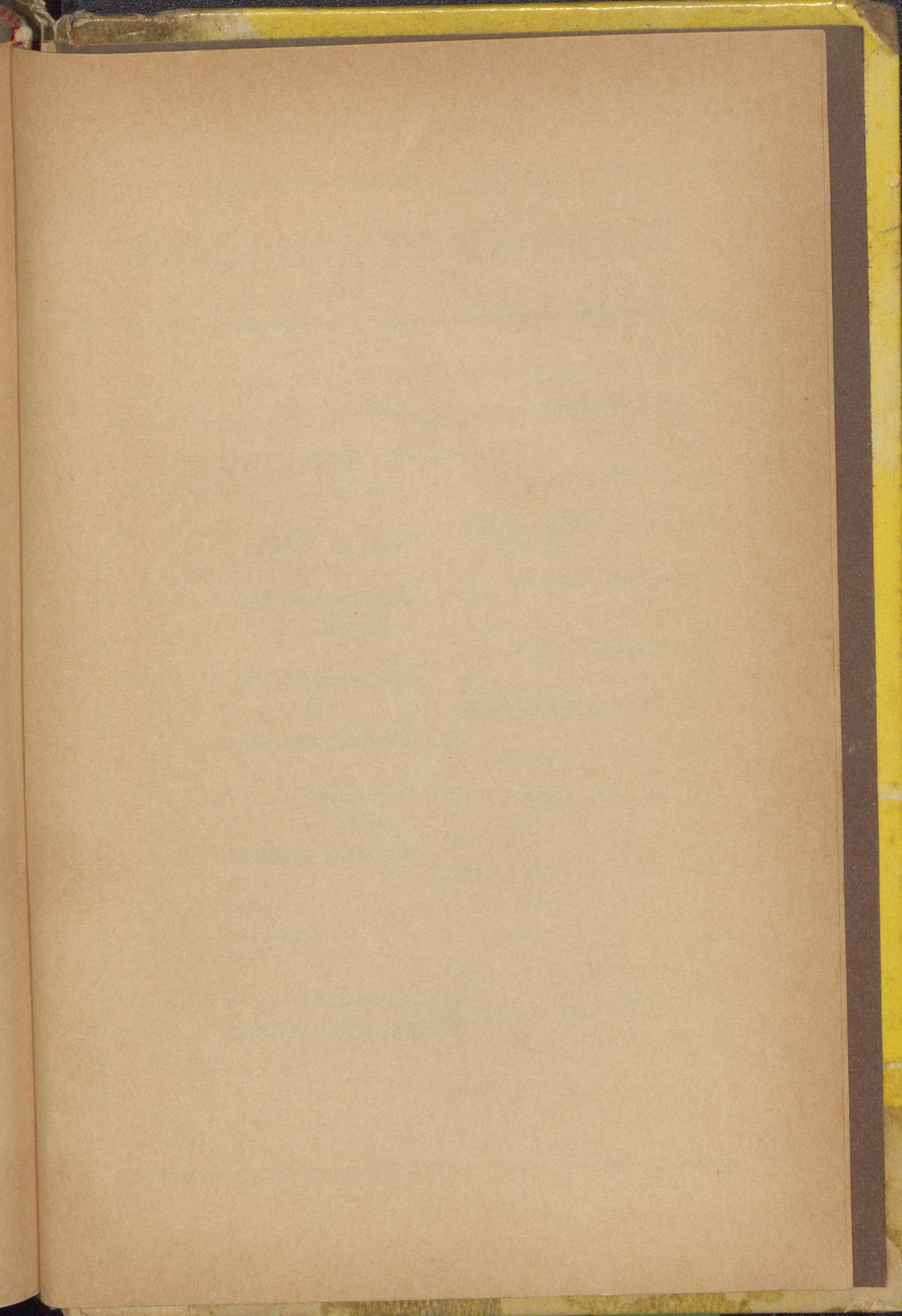
It was nearly morning when Troy stopped the car. "We're in our territory now," he said. "If we keep driving this Jerry wagon we'll be dodging

our own bullets. I'm sorry, but we had better walk the rest of the way."

"You seem to know what you're doing," the colonel said. "Carry on, Sergeant."

"My words exactly!" Major Cane said.

They started to walk—all of them so weary they could drop in their tracks, but all happy that many Allied lives would be saved because their mission was a success.



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